

**“Critical literacy seems really interesting, but why  
talk about menstruation?”**

**A critical literacy approach to teaching and learning about  
menstruation**

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## **Abstract**

For the majority of young people, puberty and sexuality education is an important source of information about menstruation. Menstruation is part of the Positive Puberty unit, Year Six to Eight in the New Zealand Health and Physical Education curriculum. The Positive Puberty unit states that students develop a positive attitude towards the changes occurring at puberty. However, dominant discourse of shame and secrecy still construct menstruation as a worrisome event that must remain hidden from awareness. I argue that a different approach to the teaching of menstruation is necessary if we are to achieve outcomes that construct puberty, particularly menstruation, in a positive way. This research uses a critical literacy where teachers and students mutually investigate a variety of possible multiple readings (re)created in the texts of print advertising produced by menstrual companies.

Teachers and students from Year Seven and Eight (ages 11-12) made up the participants of this study. The teachers attended two workshops to explore menstruation and critical literacy, and mutually construct lesson plans for an observed classroom lesson with each participating teacher. From each classroom a mixed-gendered group of six students took part in pre and post-lesson interviews, and the teachers all participated in exit interviews. All workshops and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions along with my field notes of the lesson and their activity sheets made up the data of this research. I subjected this data to post structural discourse analysis to explore the use of critical literacy as an approach to teaching menstruation.

From this analysis, I argue that while teachers still take up and (re)produce discourses of shame and secrecy, students were able to use moments of resistance to explore alternative constructions of menstruation with critical literacy dialogue promoting this exploration. As a result, I argue that while shame and secrecy are still being (re)produced, a critical literacy approach can open up new ways to construct menstruation. However, both teachers and students may need further development and experience engaging with a critical literacy approach that challenges and expands discursive constructions of menstruation. And finally, as education and research into puberty and sexuality education remains underdeveloped, I propose that more research examining how we teach the subject, and in doing so how we expand the discourse that are made available to young people, is needed.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

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I observed a conversational moment within a group of students that planted the seed for this project during my Masters' research. While the teacher was setting up equipment for her lesson on menstruation as part of the comprehensive puberty and sexuality education programme, a group of the Year Seven (ages 10-11) students started talking about an advertisement for menstruation products that had seen on television. All the students in the group knew this advert, to the point where a couple of them were able to act out the antics of the main actor. Their discussion was raucous and energised, appearing to be a stark contrast to previously observed interactions where the students often appeared reluctant and embarrassed to communicate and contribute. At the time I made a note of the event in my field notes as it stood out in importance to me, but was outside the scope of that research.

When I considered embarking on this doctoral research, I initially thought of expanding my area of research from menstruation out into other areas of puberty and sexuality education. However, this one moment, observed now five years ago, continued to play in my mind. What was it about the advertisement that changed the ways the students interacted with menstruation so dramatically? What impact could this have on the ways we teach menstruation within puberty and sexuality education? How could a teaching approach that utilised advertising influence the discourses that are taken up and used to construct our understandings of menstruation? As I write this introduction, RadioNZ reported a 10 year old girl was sent home because her school did not have the disposal unit required to deal with her menstrual management, and was only able to return to school once her parents donated a unit. It was also reported the principal suggested

the girl could go on the contraceptive pill to suppress her period (Nine to Noon, 2017). Menstruation continues to be constructed as shameful and secret, with it being seen as something bothersome that needs to be hidden, denied or eradicated. I believe there is still a need to embark on research in this area.

New Zealand has a comprehensive puberty and sexuality education programme starting at Year One (age 5-6). Most schools introduce puberty education at Year Seven, teaching about menstruation across Year Seven and Eight (ages 10-12). Although one of the schools participating in this research reported laying foundations about menstruation in Year Six. Menstruation, and indeed puberty and sexuality education in general, is often considered a 'sensitive topic, that students are reluctant to engage with (Allen, Kaestle, & Goldberg, 2011; Chrisler, 2013). Taking this into account, and my previous experience during my master's, I decided to build a study that explored using menstrual product advertisements as texts within a critical literacy lesson. Refining my initial questions down I build this research on the question: *What happens if we use a critical literacy pedagogy in puberty menstruation education?* I addressed this in relation to three groups. First, working with the teachers to see how the approach affected their own constructions of menstruation, and what impact it had on their classroom lesson. Finally, I also wanted to see how using a critical literacy approach would affect the ways students navigated the construction of menstruation, whether it allowed them to challenge dominant discourses and take up new ones.

### **The research approach**

I start this research from within a feminist poststructuralist framework (as will be discussed further in Chapter Two). From a poststructuralist framework, all meaning is constructed. This discursive construction occurs within the ways we speak and think,

what we see and recognise, and who gets to speak about what (Weedon, 1997). However, as poststructuralism sees meaning as multiple and transitory, there are always multiple discourses that provide alternative understandings to the dominant constructions (St. Pierre, 2000). In developing an awareness of these discourses and examining how they work to construct our meaning, we provide an opportunity to question the dominant constructions and explore alternatives. Through this, we create agentic opportunities to challenge and question dominant ways of understanding the world (Barrett, 2005; Davies & Gannon, 2005). Agency within poststructuralism is not the great battle to create change, but rather small guerrilla attacks that allow us to see how construction works, and potentially make decisions on whether to take up or resist these discourses (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). With menstruation constructed as a female experience, the poststructuralist approach for this research contends with feminist issues of gendered discourses and the constructed binaries that dismiss the female as irrelevant and unimportant (Kenway, Willis, Blackmore, & Rennie, 1994; Weedon, 1997).

In working with critical literacy, I pull on aspects of critical theory. Similar to poststructuralism, critical theory views meaning as a construction, often reproducing dominant power and oppression (Freire, 1996). Therefore, knowledge is never neutral (Powell, Chambers-Cantrell, & Adams, 2001). Critical literacy is political (Freire, 1996). It looks to examine the ways dominant groups create and restrict knowledge and disrupts the use of privilege and marginalisation to effect change (Freire, 1996; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). In doing so, critical literacy also steps away from traditional banking methods of education, where the teacher is seen as possessing the knowledge that they will then transmit to the student to reproduce (Freire, 1996). Teacher and students work together to build a critical literacy learning environment and create a new process of

dialogue where they can collaboratively build understandings and meanings (Freire, 1996; Mayo, 1995). Therefore in investigating the constructions of menstruation, teacher and students can examine the dominant discourses that construction our understandings of menstruation and investigate the ways these discourses work to maintain power and marginalise certain social and cultural groups.

Menstruation is a significant ongoing event in women's lives. The dominant discursive construction of menstruation may have a great impact on how young women understand their lived experience, and how people construct their understanding of what it means to be a woman (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). With schools the second most popular source of information behind mothers, the ways menstruation is taught can greatly influence this construction (Kissling, 1996a; White, 2013). In creating a critical literacy lesson looking at the texts produced by menstrual product advertising, we can examine the ways these companies rely on and reproduce the dominant discourses to sell their products. In doing so, both teachers and students, get to (re)consider the impact these discourses have on their own construction of menstruation. It provides an opportunity to examine and question dominant constructions and how they influence our understandings of menstruation.

This study contains two phases. The first phase consisted of workshops with participating teachers to explore how to approach learning about menstruation through critical literacy. The first workshop introduced the ideas of critical literacy and allowed teachers to explore their own critical literacy readings of advertisements. The second workshop allowed the teachers and me to create foundations of what would become the classroom lessons. These lessons were observed, and then teachers along with a small group of students from each lesson participated in interviews.

## **Who am I?**

During my post-graduate study, I have come to identify as a feminist poststructuralist. The poststructuralist concepts of meaning being multiple and transitory, along with the idea of agency working in small increments, in those small spaces align and compliment my own world viewpoint. I have long identified as a feminist before coming to tertiary education as a mature student, working on a personal level in areas of gender and sexuality. These aspects, along with my positioning as a white, Western woman in her 40s, from a low socio-economic group all influence the type research I create. I cannot step outside of this subject position (Davies, 2000), but instead remain aware of the influences they have on me as I navigated this research.

As a woman in her 40s I learned about menstruation over 30 years ago. My personal life experiences and the dominant culture of the period created a specific discursive construction of menstruation. As I approach this study, I looked first at how I was taught about menstruation, wanting to be aware of these understandings before I approached the current teaching context. With my experience and construction of menstruation potentially being different from participants in this study, it was important that I maintained an awareness of the influence this would have over the collection and interpretation of the data. Also, as menstruation is considered a taboo subject, with regulations on talk and concealment, it often became isolating and difficult in finding participants during the study and academic peers to communicate ideas within the topic of puberty and sexuality. Therefore making times when it was difficult to perform and sustain myself as a researcher. With all this in mind, it was important for me to maintain my reflexivity as a researcher, being aware that how I position myself and am positioned

by others will impact on the types of knowledge I produce (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan, Laws, Mueller-Rockstroh & Petersen, 2004; Pillow, 2003).

### **What is in this thesis?**

In the next chapter, *Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework - Feminist Poststructuralism and Critical Literacy*, I expand on the principles and concepts of poststructuralism. I discuss the details of language, discourse, subjectivity, power and agency. Then I consider how poststructuralism becomes aligned with feminism by examining how gendered discourses work to construct knowledge. Finally in the chapter, I examine how critical literacy views knowledge as a construct and seeks to create mutually collaborative learning environments that are designed to examine the ways dominant discourses construct and maintain power.

In the following chapter, *Chapter Three: Literature Review*, I give an overview of current literature into the discursive construction of menstruation and the teaching of puberty and sexuality education. I look at the discursive constructions and how menstrual product advertisements rely on these discourses to sell their products, (re)creating and reinforcing dominant discourses. To conclude I examine the ways critical literacy has been employed across the curriculum.

In *Chapter Four: Research Design*, I give an overview of conducting this research from a feminist methodology with qualitative methods. After outlining the process of participant recruitment, I outline using workshops, classroom observations and individual and group interviews as methods of data collection. I then explain how I used discourse

analysis with the collected data. I finish by explaining the process of getting ethics approval and why performing ethical research was important in the process of this research, both with working with participants and by engaging in a reflexive researcher standpoint.

In the second half of this thesis, I report on the findings I identified from the analysis. In *Chapter Five: Finding – Power*, I discuss the ways dominant discourses of menstruation maintain and reproduce the power to construct our understandings of menstruation. However, I also investigate ways girls use their special knowledge of menstruation to position themselves as powerful 'experts'. Finally, I examine the ways students were able to challenge discourses engaging in acts of resistance to the dominant discourses, but also how this resistance to affect change can be fragile.

In *Chapter Six: Finding – Shame and Secrecy*, I look at the ways dominant discourses of shame and secrecy influence understandings of menstruation. I start by discussing the ways the teachers navigate these discourses, how they take them up and resist them during the workshops. Then I look at how the students identified the ways these discourses were used in menstrual product advertising, as well as challenging the dominance of these discourses. During the interviews with the students, they also appear to challenge the discursive construction of menstruation as embarrassing, as well as how these discourses make students reluctant to learn about menstruation. Instead the students presented alternative discourses that construct learning about menstruation as interesting and exciting.

In the last findings chapter, *Chapter Seven: Finding – Dialogue*, I discuss how using authentic questions as part of a critical literacy approach encourages students and teachers to create a dialogue to investigate and develop a mutual learning experience. Dialogue can promote exploration of ideas and beliefs, but considering the construction of menstruation as a difficult topic, using critical literacy to teach menstruation can lead to both students and teachers feeling uncomfortable with the new approach. Nonetheless, I show how looking beyond a search for a ‘right’ answer, as well as allowing the student to take the role of teacher, can construct spaces for deeper and extensive learning to occur.

Finally, in *Chapter Eight: Implications and Conclusion*, I put forward the implications I identified during this research. I look at the need to provide a greater range of ‘acceptable’ discourses of menstruation, and especially the need to create more research into teaching menstruation and the need for education and support for teachers. I then outline the summary of this thesis, before answering the research question: *What happens if we use a critical literacy pedagogy in puberty menstruation education?*



## **Chapter Two: Theoretical Framework: Feminist Poststructuralism and Critical Literacy**

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### **Introduction**

Working from a feminist poststructuralist framework, this thesis aims to examine how a critical literacy approach effects the teaching and learning of menstruation. Menstruation is taught in New Zealand schools as part of puberty and sexuality education (Ministry of Education, 1999). In this study, workshops were created to introduce and explore using critical literacy within puberty and sexuality education. During these workshops the teacher participants considered critical literacy classroom lessons that investigated and challenged dominant discourses of menstruation. This research, the workshops and lessons are underpinned by theoretical principles of poststructuralism and critical literacy underpinned by critical theory.

From a feminist poststructuralist framework, our understanding of the world is seen as a construction. The societal, cultural, and institutional use of language builds discourses. These discourses, to varying degrees of dominance and acceptance, create our understandings of ourselves and our worlds. While these understandings are often constructed in ways that present certain meanings and knowledge as the one universal truth, poststructuralism disputes this concept and attempts to open up the possibility of different meanings and multiple truths. Therefore, I view poststructuralist theory as an ideal framework to investigate how we come to view menstruation, and take up and (re)create certain dominant discourses that construct the way it is understood. Feminist poststructuralist theory allows us to expose the binary constructions of gender and definitions of femininity. In relation to this research, the theory informs the ways gender and femaleness are (re)produced within puberty and sexuality education. The version of critical literacy used in this research, informed by a critical theory viewpoint, also sees

knowledge as a construction and challenges the idea of one true meaning that can be identified and labelled.

In this chapter I present the components of feminist poststructuralist theory that will inform my research. I start by looking at language and discourse and how they construct meaning and our understandings of our social and cultural worlds. I then proceed to the constitution of subjectivity and the ways we position ourselves within multiple and often contradictory discourses. I examine how agency is viewed within poststructuralism, in understanding and challenging discourses that present constructed meaning as an unquestionable truth. I move on to explain how feminism and poststructuralism can work together to challenge and disrupt the gendered discourses and power imbalances of our social and cultural worlds. After providing this solid foundation for feminist poststructuralism, I explore some concepts of critical literacy. From there, I examine critical theory that underpins the critical literacy framework, paying particular attention to the ideas of the construction of knowledge, and its focus on change. Finally I discuss the principles of critical literacy. With an understanding that critical literacy is political, I explore the idea of critical literacy's investigation of power and its focus on pursuing change. I also explain the principles of dialogue and mutual problem solving that work to achieve this investigation and change. Finally, I address some of the criticisms of critical literacy.

## **Poststructuralism**

### **Language**

From a humanist framework, language is seen as a neutral medium (Flax, 1987). As a linguistic signifier, language is seen to simply reflect an object (Davies, 2004). A word

signifies a thing, and a thing represents the word. All we need is the right word or to use language in the right manner to represent 'the real'. In using language as a signifier, we often group objects into categories (Flax, 1987). To make these categories appear stable, the differences found in objects are overlooked, negated or simply ignored so as to maintain an essential idea of commonality and unity. In classifying objects into one group, any differences that may threaten the one classification are often deemed irrelevant (St. Pierre, 2000). For example, the differences that ethnicity, sexuality and socio-economic status may create are often ignored within the categorisation of 'woman'.

Poststructuralist thought challenges the humanist understanding of language (Davies, 2004; Flax, 1987; Gavey, 1989; St. Pierre, 2000). Language is not transparent from a poststructuralist viewpoint. Rather than simply signifying a pre-existing object, language constructs a particular understanding. Therefore, from this framework we can see that it is not a neutral naming of the world (Davies, 2004; St. Pierre, 2000). "Furthermore 'common language is not innocent and neutral' but 'riddled with the presuppositions of Western metaphysics'" (Coward & Ellis, 1977 cited in Gavey, 1989, p. 463). Language constructs a meaning that is neither fixed nor real. The meaning of language shifts within historical periods and social context, making it always open to dispute (Gavey, 1989; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997).

By viewing language as constructing rather than referential, we can examine this construction and break down the ways we create meaning (Davies, 2004). Through this deconstruction, we can see how language creates and maintains social structures and ideals that do not exist prior to being named (St. Pierre, 2000). Language often promotes humanist ideals of unity and coherence, and creates structures and categories

of hierarchical binaries. By paying attention to, and deconstructing this use of language we can see “that absence rather than presence, and difference rather than identity produce the world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 484).

As stated earlier, categories rely on the subsumption of difference into a comprehensive identity (St. Pierre, 2000). Difference that cannot be subsumed becomes positioned as ‘other’, as an “illegitimate deviation from the one true standard” (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004, p. 433). This (re)creates the belief that one category is the ideal. Gender, race, religion; one aspect of these becomes the norm, the correct form. A hierarchical structure forms with the ascendant position being viewed as the correct and/or true category (St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore sitting within and acting from the ascendant category provides a position of power. In creating these ascendant/descendant binaries, that which is on the descendant side is known by its relation and comparison to the ascendant side. The binary categories then privilege one over the other, with the other deemed deficient and undesirable (Kenway et al., 1994; St. Pierre, 2000). For example, female is placed on the descendant side of a male/female binary. Therefore the binary positions male as normal and right, and attributes that sit outside of male are deemed abnormal and wrong (Davies, 1997a).

Poststructuralism challenges the construction of binaries by requiring us to think of language differently (St. Pierre, 2000). Humanist attempts to counter the binary positioning of gender can be seen as maintaining and reinforcing the binary separation. In privileging ‘femaleness’ as an attempt to place it on the ascendant side of the binary or encouraging women to emulate maleness, we are still creating a binary structure (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). But these challenges to the gender binary are still reliant on, and framed within the binary. The language of a binary constructs difference and implies

a known 'truth'. Questioning this language allows us to move beyond, and challenge the unitary essentialism. This provides for the opportunity to encourage a fluidity and plurality of meaning (Davies, 2004; Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). In this project, I aim to explore and disrupt gender binaries such as male/female, healthy/unhealthy, normal/abnormal. With a promotion of multiple meanings, menstruation can become an individual experience, not necessarily tied to what it means to be female or placed in a descendant position in relations to male experiences (St. Pierre, 2000).

As stated earlier, language creates meaning, and the meaning constructed is never fixed or absolute (Davies, 2004; Weedon, 1997). In this way, poststructuralists view language as transient and plural, with different discourses, different institutions, and different historical periods all constituting meaning in potentially varied ways. Language, and the meaning it constructs, is never fixed or singular. Instead, we can see meaning as transient and illusory (Gavey, 1989). What we know, the way we understand something, is created through the social and cultural constructions of meaning. "In other words, we word the world. The 'way it is' is not 'natural'" (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 483). This is a process always in motion, as we deconstruct and reconstruct our meanings. These meanings are created and maintained through everyday use and acceptance (St. Pierre, 2000). Language, with its transient multiple meanings, becomes socially regulated in ways that promote one of these meanings as ideal or the 'truth', allowing space for certain statements while limiting others (St. Pierre, 2000). In this way, certain language created discourses become prominent in the construction of meaning.

## **Discourse**

The multiplicity of meaning is a key component with poststructuralism (Weedon, 1997). With language we produce a plurality of meaning, and the discourses created through

the use of language are also multiple and provide multiple readings of 'truth' (Gavey, 1989; St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Discourse, then, can be seen as these processes through which meaning is constructed by specific groups, cultures and historical periods. Discourses are a series of related statements that produce, and are also products of social power and practices (Gavey, 1989). Therefore, discourse is not about the objects, but about the process of constructing meaning. Although discourses consist of signifiers, they are more than the objects they point to (Foucault, 1972). Discourses "are not, as one might expect, a mere intersection of things and words" (Foucault, 1972, p. 53). Instead, discourses, gather language in socially regulated ways make up the practices that construct our understanding, and form the meaning we place on objects (St. Pierre, 2000).

In seeing meaning as a construct, the object and its meaning are not simply sitting there waiting to be defined or discovered. The 'true' meaning is not something we need to search for, and once discovered, accurately name (St. Pierre, 2000).

[T]he object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the first edges of light. (Foucault, 1972, p. 49)

Poststructuralist theory is not concerned with discovering an identifiable single truth. Instead in considering discourse, we move beyond asking essentialising questions about meaning, and examine how discourses function to construct meaning and how their use is socially and culturally regulated (Kenway et al., 1994; St. Pierre, 2000).

Instead of the one truth, poststructuralism allows for, and indeed welcomes, a plurality of meanings (Gavey, 1989). Society and cultural groups create and construct meaning through discourses. Each discourse can create its own set of understandings, with

different discursively constructed meanings becoming more dominant at various times. So within poststructuralism, there are always multiple discourses offering competing ways of giving meaning to the world (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). For example, there is not simply one way to understand menstruation, but a variety of discourses that can, or have the potential to, create our social and cultural meaning of menstruation. While all discourses have the potential to construct our understandings, certain discourse gain dominance within specific groups or historical periods (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). For instance, there was a time when menstruation was constructed as dangerously toxic, able to destroy crops and/or render a male impotent. However, this is no longer considered a dominant construction of menstruation (Whelan, 1975).

The meaning created by a dominant discourse can become seen as an unquestionable truth (Kenway et al., 1994). These discourses become viewed as the natural order of things. The dominance works to conceal their actual construction (Gavey, 1989; Kenway et al., 1994). We know menstruation is bothersome because that is simply how it is, we do not have to be taught it. The discursive construction of menstruation as bothersome and problematic is presented as common sense, hiding its own partiality and intervention (Foucault, 1972; Gavey, 1989). Also as discourses become part of the social systems and practices, they are inscribed with the power to represent the 'truth' (Kenway et al., 1994).

Discourse "designates the conjunction between knowledge and power" (Kenway et al., 1994, p. 189). Social and cultural groups and institutions use their hegemonic power to regulate and restrain what can and cannot be said (Kenway et al., 1994). The discourses that are products of and produced by these dominant groups are constructed as natural and normal. In turn, these reinforce the belief that there is only one way to

understand something (Kenway et al., 1994; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, any alternative or contradictory discourse is seen as frivolous or fanciful. The power of the dominant discourse is not only in the way it constructs a particular meaning, but also in the way it can negate and marginalise other possible discourses (St. Pierre, 2000). For example, the dominance of the previously mentioned construction of menstruation as bothersome also works to construct discourses of celebration as unrealistic fantasy. During times when women's labour was deemed an economic necessity such as during the Second World War, menstruation was constructed as a sign of health and vitality, thus encouraging women to remain productive within the work force. But, after the end of the war for example, when women were seen as superfluous to a nation's productivity, menstruation became understood as a sickness, or contributing to the fragility of women (Kissling, 1996a).

However, dominant discourses are not immutable (St. Pierre, 2000). There are multiple discourses with competing meanings and the authority given to any specific discourse can vary and even co-exist (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). Like the meanings they create, discourses are also constructions. As various social and/or cultural groups gain power they construct discourses as fact that legitimatise the group's power (Scott, 1988). This is not done through bluntly imposing a belief or ideal onto society, but by creating discourses that are in turn, taken up and reproduced by the majority of the population (Gavey, 1989; Scott, 1988). It may be difficult for alternative discourses to challenge and resist the dominant position. The power that alternative discourses have to be recognised and spoken may be limited, but it is impossible to fully remove them (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). As shown with the previous example constructing menstruation as toxic and contaminating, discourses that were once dominant can lose their authority to determine 'truth'.



Through discourse we make meaning of our world, but discourse also constructs how we come to understand ourselves (Jones, 1997; St. Pierre, 2000). Poststructuralists view the subject as multiple and fluid (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). In this next section I will discuss how discourse shapes this construction of self; a self that is in constant process, directed and confined by multiple discourses both visible and hidden (Davies, 1997b).

### **Subjectivity**

One of the dominant discourses in today's society is humanism (St. Pierre, 2000). From a humanist discursive construction, the individual has an essential, coherent self (Gavey, 1989; St. Pierre, 2000). This self sits outside of, and separate from the world, able to independently observe, know and act (St. Pierre, 2000). The dominance of the humanist discourse makes it difficult to conceive and maintain understandings from alternative discourses (Kenway et al., 1994). As Jones (1997) states, "we all *experience* ourselves as humanist subjects; we *do* 'consider our options', choose and think critically act on our ideas. Our everyday language is suffused with a pronoun grammar which expresses our experience as active, independent subjects" (p. 263). Therefore it can be difficult to see beyond the humanist concept of an essential stable self. It is constantly being created and reinforced with our language, and embedded in our social systems and institutions (Davies, 1997b; Jones, 1997).

However, from a poststructuralist framework we view ourselves as humanist subjects not because we inherently are, but rather we are discursively constructed to appear so (Jones, 1997). Humanist theory has the "production of an integral identity ahead of words and action so that the latter are encountered as indexical expressions of the

former” (Green, 1988, cited in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500). Poststructuralism, on the other hand, views the words and actions, or the discourses, as constructing the self (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000; Jones, 1997). The self is inscribed as a subject within the multiple discourses available (Barrett, 2005). The discourses available to us create and regulate our way of thinking and understanding. It is from this position that we continuously construct our sense of identity (Weedon, 1997). Therefore, the dominance of the humanist discourse of self makes it difficult to see beyond the construction of a stable coherent self. Indeed, even in attempts to challenge this discourse and make possible alternatives, the idea of the essential self appears (Davies, 1997b). We are relentlessly constituted within humanist discourse even as we attempt to challenge and resist this construction (Davies, 1997b; Jones, 1997).

The humanist self is not wrong, nor is it right. Poststructuralism seeks to disrupt the binary. There is no right/wrong, no humanist/not-humanist self (Davies, 1997b). The humanist self is seen as one of a multitude of subjects. If we see the subject as inscribed through discourse, then there is potential for multiple subjects created through multiple discourses (Davies, 2000; Jones, 1997; Weedon, 1997). As stated earlier, “we word our world” (St. Pierre, 2000, p. 500) through discourse, and it is through those discourses that we speak and are spoken into being (Davies, 2000). Thus instead of being one constant, stable object, the subject becomes a discursive process, fluid and shifting (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). As Davies (1997b) points out, the poststructuralist subject “entails a move from the self as a noun (and thus stable and relatively fixed) to the self as a verb, always in process” (p. 274).

The poststructuralist subject is always a process, there is no stable constant self. The subject is, then, always in motion being revised, edited and added to through the

discursively constructed meanings, experiences and structures it encounters (Davies, 1997b). Some poststructuralists, such as St. Pierre (2000) and Davies (1997b) use the metaphor of the palimpsest.

“This metaphor is derived from the image of writing on parchment, writing which is only partially erased to make way for a new writing, each previous writing, therefore, bumping into and shaping the reading of the next layer of writing” (Davies, 1997b, p. 275).

Using this metaphor, the subject is not simply a process of one stable contained self being replaced by another. Rather it is a complex process of overlapping layers. Even as we try to erase previous subjects in an attempt to construct new ones, they still remain partially visible, shaping and directing our interpretations. We can never simply rid ourselves of the constitutive nature of discourse nor have the ability to observe from outside of it (Davies, 1997b; St. Pierre, 2000).

However, even the metaphor of a palimpsest to explain the subject as a process runs the risk of asserting the idea of a stable self (Davies, 1997b; Jones, 1997). The idea being if we can somehow just wipe away all the writing, there would be a clean parchment. If we can return the parchment to its pre-written state, then it could follow there is a pre-discursive self. A self that could exist prior to being shaped through discourse (Davies, 1997b). Jones (1997) cautions this metaphor may lead to the belief there is a stable, detached self, able to make independent choices. Davies (1997b) acknowledges the reader, constructed within the humanist discourse, may indeed construct the parchment as a pre-discursive self. This is why when writing or working within poststructuralism, she believes it is important for the writer to continue to express the subject as a process of writing, on-going and overlapping, not the page it is written upon. This, Davies (1997b) points out, is similar to Butler’s (1990) ideas of performance

of the self. The subject is the performance, not an actor who stands outside able to, and aware of choosing a part.

These metaphors highlight the multiple and often contradictory nature of subjectivity. For example, the subject of girl can be seen at the intersection of a variety of discourses that are used to construct our understandings of girl. The social and cultural worlds we live in all contribute discourses that produce our subjectivity (Weedon, 1997). Girls become girls through a mutual act of taking up a position and being positioned by discourse. This process is never concluded, always in motion (Jones, 1997). Available discourses change over time and the dominance they have in constructing meaning change shift. Therefore the point of intersection subjectivity sits at, is also fluid. What it means to be a girl is never fixed, never just one thing (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Girlness will vary depending on particular settings and the discursive meaning constructed within those settings (Jones, 1993). The girl on the sport's field may be valued for her physicality, whereas in a different social setting, the same behaviour may be viewed as problematic and undesirable.

As well as being constituted in particular ways, people also constitute themselves (Jones, 1993; St. Pierre, 2000). We simultaneously engage in a variety of subject positions that can be both complimentary and contradictory (Jones, 1993). A girl may see herself as assertive and independent, but still be concerned about what boys may think of her. For example, she may know menstruation is a normal female experience, and yet still feel shame and embarrassment about male discovery of her menstruating. These contradictions are seen as an integral part of the process of subjectivity as we are continually constituted within multiple discourses. Each discourse, layered over and

up against the other discourses, contributes to the constitution of our subjectivity (Davies, 2000; Jones, 1993).

However, it should also be noted that not every subjectivity is available to everyone. Discursive constructions around areas of gender, class, and ethnicity can limit and/or regulate the available subjectivities (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000; Jones, 1993). For example, Walkerdine (cited in Jones, 1993) points out, high achievement for girls in mathematics is usually constructed as coming from hard-work rather than brilliance. Therefore, the brilliant feminine subject is not readily a position available to girls. There are a different set of discursively constructed understandings available to different cultural, social and historical groups. Each constellation of these determines what is seen as possible and permissible. The discourses that create our cultural narratives, that make our world sense, also determine the restriction and access to the range of subjectivities (Barrett, 2005; Jones, 1993). The poststructuralist view of power operates within how people negotiate what subjectivities are available and the ways they are taken up or resisted.

## **Power**

The idea of acting from resistant positioning falls within Foucault's examination of power (Foucault, 1978, 1979). Within poststructuralist theory power is not an entity that we can possess and deploy (St. Pierre, 2000). According to Foucault (1978), power is not the institutions and mechanisms of the state, nor the general systems of domination. Rather than a resource that can be earned, gifted or lost, poststructuralist conceptions of power exists in the social relations in which people engage (Fingerson, 2006; Foucault, 1978; St. Pierre, 2000). Power in this way exists in relations.

Power is in the fluidity of social interactions. Power, always present, can be found in relationships as people continuously negotiate their way through positioning and discourse (Fingerson, 2006). Power becomes seen as a process that is always mobile, working within the ways discourses construct our understandings (Fingerson, 2006; Foucault, 1978; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Power is created through the ways knowledge is built and shared. Who has access to the knowledge and which discourses are available and those that are restricted (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Therefore, power can be understood within the multiplicity of relations in which we operate that directly or indirectly exercise control over the other (Fingerson, 2006; Foucault, 1978).

If power is seen as a process within social relations rather than a finite resource, then we see power as being everywhere:

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything but because it comes from everywhere. (Foucault, 1978, p. 93)

Therefore, if power exists everywhere, in all our relations and the ways we construct our knowledge, the impact of power is no longer constructed as uni-directional (Foucault, 1978; St. Pierre, 2000). Society tends to construct power in negative terms. The common phrase 'power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely' represents a belief that power presents a negative repressive forces wielded by the powerful against the powerless. However, by understanding power is everywhere, we can redefine the nature of power. So instead of being a negative force, "in fact power produces; it produces reality" (Foucault, 1979, p. 194). If power is productive, it is as capable of producing liberty as it is oppression.

In understanding how power works, Foucault(1979) presents a process he called 'disciplinary power'. In describing the architecture of a prison, with a central tower that allowed an unseen guard to observe all the prisoners, he shows how power relations can be created and sustained independent of the people who exercise it (Foucault, 1979). Although the prisoners were unable to tell when they were being observed, they started to regulate their behaviour as if they were always under observation. Foucault (1979) expanded on this internalised discipline of the prisoners to what he called "disciplinary society" (p. 209). With social institutions such as schools, media, and governments, all constructing disciplinary mechanisms that maintain surveillance over people, populations begin to self-discipline to align themselves with these discourses of acceptable citizenship. Therefore a shift occurs from the state and institutions active control through enforced discipline to a society that maintains control through self-discipline (St. Pierre, 2000).

While it appears that power is omnipresent, there can be no power without resistance (Foucault, 1978). Resistance occurs everywhere:

Instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case: resistances that are possible, necessary, improbable, others that are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant, or violent; still others that are quick to compromise, interested, or sacrificial; by definition, they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations. (Foucault, 1978, p. 96)

But rather than the idea of a totalising revolution that will overthrow power and establish freedom, resistance becomes a notion of 'civil disobedience' (Rajchman, 1985 cited in St. Pierre, 2000). Resistance does not exist outside and separate to power. As power and resistance exist everywhere, there is no outside force against power. Likewise,

power itself only exists when resistance acts against it. Power and resistance work together in a way that creates our reality (St. Pierre, 2000).

However, as there is no power without resistance, when the power relations shift, resistance will also form in relation to this new power position (Foucault, 1978). Relations of power are always complex and shifting. Resistance to power does not bring an end to power, but is always an ongoing process (St. Pierre, 2000). Resistance does not normally occur in “great radical ruptures [and] massive binary divisions” instead they are distributed as “the points, knots or focuses of resistance... spread over time and space at varying densities” (Foucault, 1978, p. 96). Freedom is not liberty from power, but a process of questioning and challenging the power of dominant discourse (St. Pierre, 2000). “It is the motor and principle of his skepticism [sic]: the endless questioning of constituted experience” (Rajchman, 1985 cited in St. Pierre, 2000, p. 493). Within this research, I am not looking to create a newer, better way to understand menstruation, but rather open up possibilities to explore and take up alternative understandings, including those that may be resistant to dominant discursive constructions. By making alternative discourses available people can explore new ways to position themselves and others.

## **Positioning**

Strongly connected to the idea of subjectivity is positioning (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). We position ourselves and are positioned in a variety of discourses (Jones, 1993). When taking up these subject positions, people are made subjects by their social and cultural discourse and take up these subjects as their own (Barrett, 2005; Currie, Kelly, & Pomerantz, 2007). Dominant discourse may work to construct these subject positions



as natural and inevitable, leading to the belief that there is an innate identity. However, poststructuralists view subject positions as multiple and diverse, therefore there is at least the potential for a fluid shifting construction of self (Currie et al., 2007). Therefore, the idea of identity can be seen as constructed by and created from the world in which we reside.

Our subject position is the public and private construct of the self. Unlike a role which is donned as a public performance, positioning is the public and private discursive construction of the subject (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). Therefore, while a role is something we don, positioning can be seen as who we are (Barrett, 2005; Currie et al., 2007). This can contribute to a personal and emotional investment to the positions we take up (Barrett, 2005). Therefore positioning oneself or being positioned as a menstruating woman is about taking up the beliefs, attitudes and regulations that construct menstruation as part of who you are, rather than just accepting menstruation as something that happens as part of female life. Positioning allows individuals to perceive a sense of group or category membership. Each group has set ways of thinking, behaving and interpreting the world (Davies, 2000). Althusser (1984, cited in Davies, 2000) calls this obviousnesses; the taken-for-granted meanings shared by a particular group. As these categories are often created in binaries, girl or boy; teacher or student. Therefore if you position yourself as a girl you must take on all the obviousnesses that position you as girl, such as standards of dress, behaviour and appearance that are deemed appropriately feminine. It also means you must be aware of and adhere to how they are positioned from their binary opposite (Davies, 2000).

When we take up a particular position as our own, the obviousnesses are not just accepted but also given weight as 'truths' (Davies, 2000). Each position has its own

story, a system of meanings and values (Davies, 2000; Weedon, 1997). From within each particular positioning these concepts and ideals are seen as obvious, as simply 'the way things are'. It is from this positioning we interpret our worlds. The position becomes a vantage point through which we make sense of ourselves. However, the positions we inhabit also exclude other versions of our worlds. These versions may be deemed impossible, or negated as naïve and fanciful (Barrett, 2005; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore how we position ourselves, or are positioned, has implications for how we understand ourselves and others (Barrett, 2005). For example, positioned within the hegemonic discourses of menstruation as shameful and secret, the idea of positioning oneself as a woman who is outspoken and celebratory of her menstrual status may seem ridiculous and impossible to consider.

While we take up positions, we are also positioned by other people and positions. The way we interact, talk and our behaviour with others all contribute to our own and other's positioning (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). In taking up a position as teacher in the classroom, the other is positioned as student. But concurrently, the person taking up the position of student is positioning the other as teacher. Each position is taken up and complied with by the individual as well as an imposed order assigned to it from the outside (Davies, 2000). In this way, positioning can be seen as a constantly interactive, collaborative process (Barrett, 2005). However, this is not to imply that this process is conscious or intentional. We are often unaware of our assumptions that may contribute to the need to conform to the ways we are positioned. Conforming to the discursive construction of particular positions creates acceptance and membership within the dominant groups this may regulate the discursive practices deemed acceptable and who may inhabit certain subject positions (Davies, 2000). The young girl who fails to take up the discursively constituted regulations of menstrual hygiene may find herself excluded from positioning as 'ideally feminine'.

We do not occupy one single fixed position. Instead, positioning is multiple and fluid. We position ourselves and are positioned within multiple subject positions. These positions vary and can, at times, be contradictory (Davies, 2000; Jones, 1993; Weedon, 1997). There is a need for a complex weaving of positions with consideration of the emotional meaning attached to each position and the moral system that legitimises certain subject positions (Davies, 2000). Not all subject positions are constructed as favourable or legitimate. Likewise, not all positions are available to everyone (Jones, 1993). To be constituted as acceptable, and therefore considered 'normal', people must adhere to and comply with the specifications of certain positions (Leahy, 1994). Acting from alternative or resistant positioning, or being restricted from taking up the dominant positioning may result in being deemed a social failure or unacceptable (Davies, 2000; Jones, 1993). However, in opening up alternative discourses for exploration and examination, we can create moments of agency that allow for the potential of new and resistant positioning.

### **Agency**

From a humanist discourse, the restrictions and allowances are created from outside and external to who we are (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). This force of society acts upon us, and by acting agentially we are able to fight against this force and affect change (Davies, 2000). Therefore, in humanist discourse, agency is a resource all humans have access to (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). Seen as rational autonomous beings, agency allows us to act independently in the social world for the betterment of both the individual, and possibly the larger society (Davies, 2000). With agency seen as an inherent part of human existence, those in society that are constructed as being

removed from agentic possibility, the humanist discourse will constitute them as less human (Davies, 2000).

Poststructuralism challenges the construction of humanist agency. The ability to have and perform humanist agency is seen as an individual trait, unconnected to a person's relation to the world and society (Benson, 1990; Davies, 2000). Benson (1990) proposes humanist agency "are abilities of a sort which we meaningfully could possess and exercise while living in nearly total isolation from any other person" (p. 49). Agency, seen this way is part of an essential individual core separate from and unaffected by other individuals or social constructs. Agency, free from societal influence is also determined to be value-free (Benson, 1990). Therefore when the agentic acts conform to, and are approved by the dominant social systems, this is seen as supporting and validating these systems. However, from a poststructuralist framework, this can be read as the power of the dominant discourses to restrict and/or invalidate other alternative positionings (Davies, 2000).

In a poststructuralist theoretical framework, the subject is in a constant process of being (re)created through discourse. Without the essential coherent self, outside of and unaffected by the social world, the humanist idea of agency is seen as an illusion (Davies, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2005). Agency still exists in a poststructurally constituted world, however, it is seen as being performed and achieved in different ways (Davies, 2000). A poststructuralist version of agency is not located in an independent self outside of society, but rather the subject's ability to recognise, understand and potentially disrupt the discourses that work to constitute them and their worlds (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). The constituted nature of the poststructuralist subject means it is not predetermined, but rather fluid. The very nature of the subject constituted in

relation to social and cultural discourse, allows for those relations to be reworked, disrupted and/or reworked (Butler, 1995).

Reworking discourses that constitute a subject may be one way to enact agency. During the interviews for my Masters research (Agnew, 2012), one of the girls, whom I will call Olivia, stated she had taken the menstrual pad rubbed it against her cheek. "I just ignored all the boys," she said, "and was like mmm, it's soft". She went on to describe herself as different, "cos I'm just really out there, everyone knows that." Her positioning as being odd and 'out there' enables her to act against the discursive constructions of hygiene and shame. By accepting that she is constructed as different from the other girls she is able to act in ways normally restricted. Her actions can then be seen as a challenge and subversion of the construction of menstrual pads as dirty and contaminating. But by disrupting and challenging these discourse she is also reinforcing her own position outside of the dominant group (Davies, 2006).

Olivia's ability to act in ways that could be read as challenging and resisting the dominant discourses, did not mean she was able to simply step outside of them and make free autonomous choices (Davies, 2000). Olivia seems aware of her positioning as 'out there' and how that constructs her differently as the other in relation to her female peers. Her behaviour in rubbing the menstrual pad against her face was not simply a choice to act against the dominant discourses. While it may appear that she is choosing to resist the dominant discourses that regulate treatment of menstrual products, she is also conforming to her own constitution as alternative. The subjectivities we take up and how we are positioned dictate our choices. What may appear to be a free choice is actually the result of the discourse constituting us in ways that encourage us pursue a particular line of action (Davies, 2000).

Therefore, agency does not represent a freedom or ability to step outside of the discursive construction of the self. Instead poststructural agency is our capacity to recognise and understand the constitution of ourselves as subjects (Davies, 2000). When we understand discourses and the subjectivities they constitute are multiple and often contradictory, we may also be able to recognise that no one discourse or positioning represents the 'truth' (St. Pierre, 2000). Agency can be used to question the assumptions of normalcy that dominant discourses construct. Why is this considered normal? What are the discourses that are constructing this truth? Who is allowed to speak? Who and what is considered legitimate? When it can be understood that these normative conditions and regulations are inscribed not from power outside of us, we can see that we are dually constructed by and construct these discourses (Davies, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2005).

These agentic moves are not grand. They do not offer hero narratives in the way humanist agency provides (Davies, 2000). Instead of the celebrated individual bringing about great change, agency becomes about the moments, about finding "a series of escapes, of small slides of plays, of crossings, of flights – that open (an other, slippery) understanding" (Davies & Gannon, 2005, p. 319). Agency is no longer constructed as an act of simple opposition (Davies & Gannon, 2005). It can be seen as a complicated manoeuvre of authorship, that may be fragmented and transitory, existing only within the moment within the constituted position (Davies, 2000). It requires the invisible discursive forces to be made visible and revisable (Barrett, 2005). It requires an awareness of the occupation of multiple positionings that may allow you to speak *and* be heard. It may mean combining discourses in new ways, to push at the dominant meanings so to forge new possibilities (Davies, 2000). Agency can come "through the

invention of words and concepts that capture a shift in consciousness that is beginning to occur, or through imagining not what is, but what *might* be” (Davies, 2000, p. 67). In this way agency is no longer a heroic battle to bring change, but an ongoing guerrilla, and perhaps subversive, campaign.

When agency is viewed from a poststructuralist framework, it challenges the notion that agency is an inherent ability that people must simply be shown how to enact. Instead it can be seen that the power of the dominant discursive construction in social and cultural groups can regulate what can or cannot be said or heard (Davies, 2000). This construction can make some subject positions appear righteous and celebrated, whilst positioning others as faulty and deviant (Benson, 1990). Our ability to speak and open up new subjectivities to be taken up can be severely restricted (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). In challenging the power of the dominant discourses, individuals risk being positioned in negative ways or losing access to previously held subject positions. The previously constructed ‘good girl’ may wish to challenge the discourses of appropriate female behaviour. In doing so she may “disrupt the signifying processes through which she is constituted” (Davies & Gannon, 2005, p. 318). This may be a moment for her alone, or it may make visible constructs that have been hidden. It may offer the potential to reconsider how she view herself and her world, or it could impact on awareness of our constitution and contribute to the creation of new subjectivities. But the risk of this action may mean she becomes discursively constructed as other, positioned in ways that remove her from being viewed as a legitimate speaker and an appropriated constituted subject (Davies, 2000).

## **Feminist poststructuralism**

There is nothing inherently feminist about poststructuralism as previously presented in this chapter. Indeed, for a number of feminists, poststructuralism is antithetical to feminist theory and practice (Kenway et al., 1994; Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralism's challenge of the idea of an essential self can be seen as negating the concept of womanhood (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). Much of feminist theory and practice has been built on the idea of sisterhood, an essential common bond that connected all women (Weedon, 1997). Feminist ideas that attempt to celebrate womanhood or reverse the hierarchal positions of the male/female binary are still positing fixed qualities of woman. In turn, this can contribute to the rigid narrow understanding of womanhood (Gavey, 1989).

Poststructuralism attempts to subvert this construction, not by privileging what it means to be a woman, but rather seeing womanhood as fluid, multiple and often contradictory (Gavey, 1989). When we no longer view woman as having an established definition, we can start to explore the ways womanhood is constructed (Kenway et al., 1994). In asking questions about how gender is defined, who gets to make these definitions and who benefits from them, we can start to make explore the way patriarchal society marginalises women as 'other' (Weedon, 1997). We begin to see gender as historically and socially constructed in ways that make them seem self-evident. Instead of trying to present an alternative view of the real meaning of womanhood that can be celebrated and encouraged, feminist poststructuralism disrupts the idea that there is *any* stable truth that can define women (Davies & Gannon, 2005).

Much of what and how we think about gender appears common-sense and a taken-for-granted truth (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Gendered discourses often seem inevitable,



and girls and women seem to actively and implicitly take up gendered subject positions that appear to limit them (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 2011). Poststructuralism allows us to see how we are constituted from the outside through societal and cultural discourse while at the same time take them up as our own (Davies & Gannon, 2005). "Subjectification involves simultaneous imposition and active take-up of the gendered conditions of existence" (Davies & Gannon, 2005, p. 319). Feminist poststructuralism works by employing an agentic approach to gender by asking questions of and making visible the ways we are gender constructed. This approach opens up the possibility for "mobilising counter hegemonic feminist definitions and interpretations to create broad oppositional groups and alliances" (Kenway et al., 1994, p. 190).

Feminist poststructuralism requires more than just theory. Theory alone does not provide the impetus for change (Flax, 1987). For research to be undertaken from a feminist framework, it must take or present action for change. "Without feminist political actions theories remain inadequate and ineffectual" (Flax, 1987, p. 623). Feminist theories investigate the way gender is formed and understood and to expose and challenge the inequalities in power and representation (Flax, 1987; Weedon, 1997). As Flax (1987) points out, feminism should not just address how women are constructed and constrained through gendered discourse, but also show how men are governed by the same discursive constructions. In making visible the discourses that appear to be natural and true, we are able to start questioning the inclusion and exclusion of the requirements of acceptable gender positioning. Why should girls feel embarrassed about their menstrual cycles? Why is it 'unmasculine' to discuss menstruation? Once the dominant discourses are acknowledged and made explicit, feminist poststructuralism offers a framework that allows for a variety of ways to understand and (re)construct gender. It can also provide a greater understanding into why we are often

implicit in the maintenance of the dominant gender constructions, and provide possible avenues to disrupt them (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 2011; Kenway et al., 1994).

### **Critical theory**

The previously described elements of poststructuralist theory informed my exploration of the teaching of menstruation through a critical literacy approach. Using poststructuralist concepts, I pursued the idea of all our understandings and knowledge being a construction and therefore transient and multiple in nature (St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). However, in engaging with critical literacy, I am also employing elements of critical theory that require action from both the research and the researcher (Blake & Masschelein, 2002; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). In this section, I will briefly outline the ideas of critical theory, focusing on the constructive nature of knowledge and requirement that critical literacy research productions action.

Critical theory and poststructuralism both view knowledge and meaning as a construction. Within poststructuralism, language and discourse (in)form our understandings (Davies, 2004; Gavey, 1989; St. Pierre, 2000). Critical theory views knowledge as constructed through the interaction with objects; knowledge does not pre-exist, but emerges through invention and exploration (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Critical theory challenges the notion of knowledge and understandings being a passive predetermined thing that can be deposited into the learner. Instead the binary of teacher and student become blurred, with knowledge something to be sought through investigation and a constant inquiry in and with the world (Freire, 1996). In this way knowledge is not static or truly knowable, but a process of invention that requires

the subject to explore, challenge and build on what has already been known (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

With the idea of knowledge being transitory and evolving shared with poststructuralism, critical theory deviates from poststructuralism with its tenet that research must produce action (Blake & Masschelein, 2002; Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). When using a feminist poststructuralist theory to engage with this research, I took up the feminist ideas that research requires more than just theory that it must present action for change (Flax, 1987). As discussed earlier, the ideals of feminist research promoting change can balance what it sometimes considered the overly theoretical nature of poststructuralism. In using critical theory to inform the practice of critical literacy in this research. I am continuing with the belief that research needs to be transformative and emancipatory (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

Critical theory presupposes a world of oppressions at a structural and institutional level (Freire, 1996). Therefore, in engaging with critical literacy based in critical theory, the world exists as a concrete and solid truth. This may be seen as a unrectifiable contradiction to the idea of the poststructural world that only exists in the moment, build on discourse (St. Pierre, 2000). However, I argue that within the classroom lesson, the artefacts present, the texts, the students and the teacher, create a momentary representation of the world of oppression. With this world being continuously discursively constructed (Weedon, 1997), students and teachers are able to position and be positioned in acceptance or rebellion, to take up or resist the constructed oppression.

The critical theory that unpins the critical literacy approach to menstruation education used in this thesis primarily focuses on change. The idea of change sits at the core of

critical theory. While critical theory describes the world being observed, neither the research nor the researcher are positioned as neutral (Blake & Masschelein, 2002; Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Instead critical theory seeks to make issues of power and oppression visible. Within this process of reflection and investigation of the ways power forms our understandings of the world, critical theory calls upon the research to take an active role in the struggle against injustice and oppression (Freire, 1996). Critical theory requires a cycle of “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1996, p. 33). Just as dominant discourses become seen as natural and unquestionable, for critical theory “oppression is domesticating” (Freire, 1996, p. 33). The critique of critical theory provides a challenge to the ideas and beliefs reproduced by the dominant ideologies constructing knowledge.

### **Critical literacy**

Influenced and built upon by the principles of critical theory, the version of critical literacy used in this research calls for social action (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Critical literacy includes the decoding and analysis of texts, with a reflection on how the world and people’s lives are constructed, but it also focuses on doing something with the knowledge gained. Critical literacy requires us to take action (Harwood, 2008; McDaniel, 2004; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). Understanding and knowledge can be gained through a critical literacy reading, but without using that knowledge to transform themselves or the world, critical literacy would simply be considered empty theorising (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Aligned with feminist imperatives for action and transformation, the feminist critical literacy employed with this research requires action towards change. The reflection on the gendered construction of puberty and sexual maturity engages the reader to question and challenge, not just their own

construction, but also the institutional and ideological boundaries that inhibit full access to equality and power (Kempe, 2001; Norton, 2011).

With the reader engaging in texts, the concept of a text within critical literacy expands beyond the traditional understanding of books and literature (Robinson & Robinson, 2003; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). When we consider the idea of a text it is often limited to the conventional production of writing; for example a school journal, a picture book, or perhaps a newspaper article. These types of texts conform to set rules and conventions, which are taught within literacy learning. But the critical literacy approach used in this research with puberty and sexuality education broadens the idea of what constitutes a text to include everything. If we consider a text as a “vehicle through which individuals communicate with one another, using the codes and conventions of society” (Robinson & Robinson, 2003, p. 3), then almost everything becomes a text. No longer limited to books, texts surround us. Texts can be written, verbal, imagery and in movement (Sandretto & Tilson, 2014). We see them in books, advertisements, movies, music and performance. We hold them in our hands, flip through them on television screens and surf them on our digital devices (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). This expansive definition of texts encourages us to be aware of and examine a wider variety of textual input in our lives, rather than imposing an artificial limit on what is considered relevant and important (Lankshear, 1994). The view of everything as a potential text opens the possibility for what Gilbert (2001) calls “working with ‘real’ texts, ‘real’ social practices, ‘real’ cultural networks and groups” (p. 77). In doing so, we place the texts and critical literacy within the social context that shapes our perceptions and actions (Gilbert, 2001; Harwood, 2008).

The critical literacy employed as part of this research assumes that knowledge is not neutral (Powell et al., 2001). The critical literacy investigation highlights the power of dominant social and cultural groups to create and restrict knowledge and meaning (Freire, 1996). People are exposed to an enormous variety of texts in their daily lives. A critical literacy analysis decodes these texts for the institutional structures and cultural practices that are represented in and through our texts (McDaniel, 2004). This allows for the critical literacy student to discover the often hidden assumptions and biases created in and by texts (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Critical literacy is political (Freire, 1996). “In a way, the literacy researcher needs to disrupt unconscious routines rather than simply report them, and bring into relief the politics which inhere in the dialectics of daily life and struggle” (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993, p. 405). Accordingly, critical literacy seeks to expose privilege where it works to perpetuate the dominant ideologies and limit alternative discourses. This awareness enables the disruption of privilege, power and marginalisation, allowing for the potential of change (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993; Powell et al., 2001). By taking a critical literacy approach to examining menstrual product advertisements, the reader can expose the ways menstruation product companies (re)produce dominant discourses of shame and secrecy, and in doing so, question these constructed meanings.

However, the people marginalised and invisible within dominant discourse often (re)create the constructed knowledge (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, critical literacy attempts to make visible the ways people may be complaint with their own oppression (Freire, 1996). Within the context of this research into the construction of menstruation, dominant discourses create binaries of normal(non-menstruating)/abnormal(menstruating), and definitions of acceptable femaleness<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The discursive construction of menstruation is detailed further in Chapter 3: Literature Review.

While these discourses may work to restrict and limit some people, the same people often recreate and reinforce them within their own lives and their interactions with others. Critical literacy can show how we become complicit in our own oppression and control (Freire, 1996; Harwood, 2008). As Freire (1996) puts it, “[f]unctionally, oppression is domesticating” (p. 33). On exploring and questioning ‘taken-for-granted’ knowledge, critical literacy often begins to draw attention to, and in doing so, making overtly oppressive, the common-place institutional and cultural dominant discourse we live within (Mayo, 1995; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). As a result, the reflection required by critical literacy may result in greater feelings of oppression and marginalisation, leading to a greater challenge to assumed norms (Freire, 1996).

This process of reflection and critique is facilitated through dialogue (Freire, 1996; Sandretto, 2016). The teaching of critical literacy steps away from the tradition of ‘banking education’ where a teacher imparts information that the student stores and builds upon (Freire, 1996). Instead, it sets out to create a dialogical exchange where the line between teacher and student blurs as each learns from the other (Sandretto, 2016). At first, this may require the teacher to facilitate and guide his or her students through the new process, but the eventual aim is to achieve a mutually collaborative teaching environment. In creating a partnership, both teacher and student become responsible for the learning which benefits them all (Mayo, 1995; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). However, the dialectical nature of traditional education models often makes implementing a dialogical problem-posing approach a difficult procedure. The dominant construction of the educational and school setting promotes teacher and students as opposite and separate, making it difficult to see and/or position them on an equal footing (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

The problem-posing approach to critical literacy reflects a poststructuralist notion of multiple meanings. While dominant groups may use a banking model to maintain a particular knowledge and conceal its construction, critical literacy aims to make this construction visible and through a dialogical investigation uncover the variety of meanings that may have been concealed and otherwise remain implicit (Ashcraft, 2012; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). This problem-solving approach sees the presentation of acknowledged meaning as the starting point, from which a process of knowing and understanding reality can begin. Critical literacy rejects the notion of permanence (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). Instead, we are “beings in the process of *becoming* – as unfinished uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (Freire, 1996, p. 65). Critical literacy, always a dynamic process where understanding and knowing is potentially being remade, views the world and everyone in it as existing in a constant flux.

However, for some educators, the requirement to pursue change, and challenge dominant constructions of knowledge may be considered a limitation. The idea of literacy as political may represent a moral dilemma. Teachers may hesitate in implementing a literacy programme that has social action as a foundational tenet because of a concern of imposing their own views (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). However, as a poststructuralist, I would propose that we all, as members of society, are constantly recreating and reproducing meaning through our use of discourse. Therefore, our interactions, including teaching, are never value or meaning-free. Another criticism of critical theory suggests the essentialisation of the ‘Oppressed’. Freire’s assumption that the struggle against oppression represents a “move towards true humanity” overlooks the diversity and difference amongst marginalised and opposed



groups (Weiler, 1991, p. 453). It also fails to account for the possibility of being multiply-positioned, potentially in contradictory positions of dominance and oppression (Luke & Woods, 2009).

## **Conclusion**

From a poststructuralist framework, there is no one absolute truth, but rather multiple, conflicting and transient truths. Research from a poststructuralist framework does not try to seek out and expose the real meaning (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Instead, poststructuralism sees meaning as multiple, and fluid. Our knowledge and understanding is constructed through language and the ways in which we speak and create texts. These discourses, the ways we speak about things, creates our understandings. Meaning is constructed by these discourses while at the same time we construct and reinforce these discourses (Gavey, 1989; St. Pierre, 2000). Likewise our sense of who we are becomes constituted through the societal and cultural discourses that make up our understanding of the world. There is no inherent independent self, instead we are constituted through and within discourse. Rather than a static self, this creates subjects that are multiple, fluid and often contradictory (Davies, 1997b; Weedon, 1997).

A feminist view point influenced the poststructuralist framework employed in this research. Using feminist poststructuralism to investigate the gendered discourse (re)creating our understanding of menstruation, this research sought to challenge the accepted gendered binaries and open up the possibilities of alternative and multiple positionings (Davies & Gannon, 2005; Gavey, 1989).

Combining the ideas of poststructuralism and critical theory's belief of the constructed nature of knowledge, this research uses a critical literacy approach to teaching menstruation. Critical literacy, informed by Freire's work in critical theory, calls for social change. Core to critical theory and critical literacy, and in line with feminist theory, is a call for action (Harwood, 2008; McLaren & Lankshear, 1993). Critical literacy is political (Freire, 1996); it does not view information, and therefore research, as neutral. Instead, critical literacy requires us to ask what purpose our understandings serve and who benefits from that purpose. To achieve this, critical literacy steps away from the traditional banking method of education to create a collaborative teaching environment. By implementing a dialogical problem-solving approach, critical literacy provides opportunities for both teacher and student to examine and challenge the ways we are all (re)created.

It is from this theoretical framework that I will investigate and present recent research into the topics that will form the basis of my research. In the next chapter I will examine and outline the discourses that constructed menstruation, paying particular attention to how those discourses are represented in media and advertising. Alongside the discursive construction of menstruation, I will be investigating how the discourses that construct menstruation work to constitute female subjectivities and the ways girls position themselves as menstruating women. Finally I will examine critical literacy as a teaching tool, and the possible benefits it may have to allow for agentic investigations into the constructed meaning of menstruation.

## Chapter Three: Literature Review

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### Introduction

The feminist poststructuralist theory outlined in the previous chapter posits that all knowledge is a construction. Language, the ways we use it, react to it and engage with it, is not just referential but constructs multiple and varied meaning through the creation of discourses (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). A variety of discourses work to construct our understanding of ourselves and our world. Some of these discourses become dominant and are often considered unquestionable and true, while others are seen as unrealistic and fanciful. Poststructuralist theory and the critical theory that informs critical literacy seek to make this process of construction both visible and investigated (Davies, 2000; Davies & Gannon, 2005). By making the ways discourses work visible, we can see how knowledge can be created and maintained by various social and cultural institutions while other meanings become marginalised and/or completely rejected. The agentic push of feminist poststructuralism and critical theory is to question and challenge these dominant discourses and make room for other discourse to be examined and potentially taken up (Barrett, 2005; Davies & Gannon, 2005). This theoretical framework informs how I examined the literature reporting on research similar to this thesis' investigation into using critical literacy to explore the teaching and learning of menstruation.

Sexuality and the sexual maturation of the human body are often considered difficult and embarrassing topics for discussion. This intensifies when it presents the possibility of children as sexual beings. Therefore, the topic of puberty and sexuality education often becomes framed as controversial and complicated (Chrisler, 2013; Diorio & Munro, 2000). This construction of puberty and sexuality education as a difficult topic can be

evident in the limited research in the area, particularly teaching menstruation. The limited research into teaching menstruation I analyse research that looks at the construction of our understanding of menstruation. The dominant discourses of shame, secrecy, and hygiene strongly influence the meaning we give to menstruation (e.g Diorio & Munro, 2000; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Newton, 2012). These discourses are also strongly represented in menstrual product advertising. The advertisements often (re)create and reinforce these constructions of menstruation in order to present their menstrual products as essential for acceptable femininity (Raftos, Jackson, & Mannix, 1998). Therefore critical literacy becomes an approach to make these discourse and the meanings they construct visible. Critical literacy has encouraged people, both students and teachers, to explore and challenge what is understood as knowledge and pushes for action towards social change (Freire, 1996).

While my literature review focuses on this century's research into menstruation, much of the findings reported currently replicate research completed decades ago. Research presented 40 years ago showed that issues of hygiene, shame and secrecy were paramount in our understanding of menstruation (Clarke & Ruble, 1978; Whelan, 1975). These discourses remain present and still shape our understandings of menstruation today (Agnew, 2012). While discourses of shameful secrecy and menstruation as a hygiene crisis remain dominant, there appears to be the beginnings of an active challenge against this construction (Bobel, 2006; Chrisler, 2013; Docherty, 2010; Fahs, 2013). These researchers report on their promotion of "menstrual activism" with its overt attempts to make menstruation visible and challenge the discourses of shame and secrecy. Fahs (2013) in her course on 'Gender, Bodies and Health' required students to devise and make a record of active interventions that would combat the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy. These interventions ranged from handing out menstrual products with accurate information about the menstrual cycle to a group that

had a member walk through a mall with a visible realistic looking menstrual stain on her white pants and document people's reactions. While activists like Chella Quint, with her TED talk (Ted Talks, 2012) and zine "Adventures in Menstruating" (Quint, n.d.) set out to encourage women to embrace menstruation rather than internalising the discourses of shame that lead many women to disconnect from their own bodies (Docherty, 2010). The construction of menstruation as a negative unwanted aspect of womanhood still remains dominant and resistant to challenge, therefore this project aims to contribute to, and highlight alternative and potentially resistant discourses that may shape our understandings of menstruation.

This review of the research literature does not include the medical and scientific research into menstruation. While this important research impacts on the discourses that circulate around menstruation and indeed may influence the topic of menstrual suppression I discuss later in this chapter, its scope sits outside of the framework for this project. Likewise, the different cultural, religious and indigenous practices and beliefs associated with menstruation provide a more detailed picture of menstruation and its meaning than I am able to full represent within this project. The construction of menstruation in different cultural and spiritual communities can show a more diverse understanding, and also show how dominant discourses work to invalidate or hide other discursive beliefs. This is particularly well presented in Murphy's (2011) Masters' thesis on menstruation in pre-colonial Māori society where she argues that menstruation within traditional Māori culture was seen as spiritual and a connection to the divine, until the imposition of colonial ideologies of female inferiority and menstrual pollution distorted and retold in these narratives. Finally, while this research takes place in New Zealand, the majority of the literature in this review originates from international locations. While there seems to be no particular reason for this gap, there appears to be very little research, besides the Diorio and Munro (2000) article that looks specifically within a New Zealand context.

While I am predominantly working within a poststructuralist context, much of the research using critical literacy develops from Freirian critical theory. While I discussed the different theoretical approaches in the previous chapter, with their limits, benefits, conflicts and similarities, I will not be continuing that analysis in this literature review. But rather I will examine the ways critical literacy has been implemented into teaching, the benefits it brings to opening up a variety of readings and constructed knowledge. There is not one right way to theorise critical literacy and like critical literacy itself, there are always multiple readings to draw upon (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). While there is no current research that uses critical literacy to teach menstruation or puberty, I will show its use across the curriculum and how it has been used to address gender and sexuality. So I will start by first outlining the construction of menstruation.

Therefore, using the theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism outlined in the previous chapter, I have collected and examined research literature mainly published from 2000 forward which focuses on the social and cultural meaning of menstruation, and the ways menstruation is represented in media, with specific attention to menstrual product advertising. With an understanding of both critical theory and poststructuralist theory, I also investigated literature concerning the implementation of critical literacy across the curriculum and how it can be used to promote social transformation. In this chapter I investigate the ways menstruation is constructed, and the discourses that remain dominant in that construction. With an understanding of the dominant discourses of menstruation I then explore how these manifest in advertising for menstrual products. As I investigate how these advertisements can be used in a critical literacy approach to teaching menstruation, I also explore research into how we approach puberty and

sexuality education. I then consider how teachers have taken a critical literacy approach in their classrooms and the benefits and critiques they report. I will focus my literature mainly on the research published from 2000 and forward.

### **The construction of menstruation**

Menarche indicates a significant milestone in a woman's life. This milestone dictates the dividing line between childhood and adulthood, or at least the beginning moment of the journey towards becoming an adult (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013 ; Lee, 2009; Newton, 2012). Girls learn from various sources, e.g. parents, school, the media, menstruation means they are growing up, becoming a woman and this is a natural and normal experience. Achieving this milestone of development is reported by some girls as creating a bond a sense of belonging to the group that menstruates. In a North Midland study of 62 females and males ranging from school age to the over-60s, girls already menstruating developed a sense of, and were often seen as being more mature and therefore privy to special knowledge (Newton, 2012). Indeed some research, a narrative analysis of 155 undergraduates of the Pacific Northwest (Lee, 2009), and a sociological examination of the experiences of a group of American teenagers (Fingerson, 2006) report a move from total negativity about menstruation to discussions about ambivalent and potentially positive reactions.

However, menstruation potentially restricts and regulates the constitution of being a woman. The dominant discourses around gender construct an ideal of femininity that women are required to attain (Block Coutts & Berg, 1993; Lee, 2009). Femininity differs from femaleness. The female body in its 'natural' form is considered inferior and needing constant management and control (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013). Femininity represents

a pure, attractive desirable woman. It, therefore, requires all aspects considered polluting, shameful and unappealing to be sanitised or hidden. Menstruation attacks and potentially destroys that acceptable feminine by drawing attention to the uncontrolled femaleness (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Kane, 1990). When looking at the construction of gender in menstrual product advertising, Kane (1990) presented an idea that “[f]emaleness is the raw condition, femininity is the cooked. Although it is important that femininity have the aura of being natural, it is clearly an acculturated state” (p. 89). Femininity, presented as natural and proper, creates an acceptable presentation of being a woman, especially because of its ability to mask femaleness. Using this discursive binary of femininity being good versus female as bad, menstrual product advertising (re)produces the message that menstruation with its connection to femaleness is bad and shameful, but using their product will enable a bodily construction of femininity so no one will ever know (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Kane, 1990).

The majority of the research into menstruation shows how the connection with cleanliness creates a discourse of menstruation as a hygiene crisis (e.g. Diorio & Munro, 2000; Fahs, 2013; Mazzarella, 2008; Merskin, 1999; Newton, 2012; Raftos et al., 1998). Classroom lessons focus on hygienic management and menstrual product companies produce much of the resource material used in schools (Agnew, 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000; White, 2013). While mothers remain the primary source of information for girls about menstruation (Kissling, 1996a; White, 2013), schools, and increasingly media sources, contribute a great deal to young people’s developing constitution of menstruating women (Mazzarella, 2008; Thornton, 2013; White, 2013). The connection of this classroom material to the menstrual product industry emphasises the focus on hygiene and maintaining a proclaimed ideal of femininity (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Merskin, 1999; Raftos et al., 1998).



When we almost exclusively associate menstruation with hygiene, we strip away the other possible connections (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013). During her study into the online sites directed at girls entering puberty, Mazzarella, (2008) found, in preparation for menarche, girls most often receive their first menstrual products. Menstrual product companies often produce specific products meant to introduce girls to management of their periods. While an important aspect of living as a menstruating woman, it often occurs in isolation, without any reference or discussion of what menstruation means socially, culturally and politically (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013; Mazzarella, 2008). From the onset of menstruation, girls learn they must focus on and remain constantly active in the management of their bodies (Allen, et al., 2011; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Raftos et al., 1998). With the dominant cultural discourse emphasising the threat to personal and social hygiene, menstruation and, by association, being a woman becomes a problem to be solved (Mazzarella, 2008).

As much as we celebrate menarche as a milestone in a girl's life, we view menstruation as problematic (Mazzarella, 2008). Society views menstruation as messy and dirty, and menstrual blood as disgusting and smelly (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Raftos et al., 1998; Simes & Berg, 2001). By associating a quintessential symbol of being a woman with being unclean and disgusting, discourses on menstruation work to construct the idea of womanhood as also being unclean and disgusting. We teach young people to view menstruation as a normal, natural process and part of being a woman and yet at the same time warn girls to protect themselves and others from the problems their bodies will create (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Newton, 2012). Girls face constant warning their bodies will let them down and they must always be on guard against this. In her research looking at how learnt processes of body surveillance and control influence the 'status

passage' of menstruation, Newton (2012) observed puberty lessons introducing the topic of menstruation to British girls of the Midlands, aged 12-14 years. During one lesson about menstruation she reported the girls were told they were required to change their sanitary towels very frequently, even if there was little or no blood on them. The teacher added "this is important and those of you who aren't listening will go around smelly" (Newton, 2012, p. 398). This treatment of menstrual blood and by connection the female body as dirty creates and contributes to a discourse of stigma and shame, as well as a taught imperative to maintain an appearance of 'normal' (Laws, 1990; Newton, 2012)

The focus on management of a problematic female body and menstruation creating a hygiene crisis "represents a judgement on the "place" of menstruating women" (Laws, 1990, p. 32). Due to the perceived risks to personal and public hygiene and the attack it presents to the ideal of acceptable femininity, menstruation should be hidden and secret (Allen, et al., 2011; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Newton, 2012; White, 2013). The large majority of women experience menstruation as part of their lives for approximately 40 years. However, we seldom acknowledge or observe menstruation occurring (Koff & Rierdan, 1996). The dominance of the discourse of secrecy, of hiding menstruation, leads us to pretend no women, at any given time, ever menstruates (Diorio & Munro, 2000). As Newton (2012), in her British generational study about the beliefs surrounding menstruation, depicts clearly, the process of menstruation is not invisible, it is an acceptable fact of life:

Menstruation as a 'fact of life' for most women in their reproductive years is also a factor in the 'everyday lives' of the wider population, which sees menstrual products in brightly coloured packaging stacked on supermarket shelves, advertisements on television depicting young slim women skipping through the heaviest days of their period in flimsy summer dresses, while at the same time

women bemoan and chatter about 'that time of the month', but also make quips or jokes about Pre-menstrual tension (PMT). Menstruation is a fact of our everyday lives and 'we' do talk about it. (p. 394)

However, when menstruation moves from the abstract to the personal, the way we view and discuss it changes. When menstruation becomes connected to oneself or a specific woman, beliefs about secrecy and shame appear. While menstruation becomes more visible, menstruating women still face stigma and embarrassment (Newton, 2012). Signs of menstruation, such as leakage or being seen with menstrual products creates a sense of humiliation in many women (Allen, et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). And from a study of 199 US undergraduate students, Scholler, Ward, Merriwether, and Caruthers (2005), found when others, male and female, observe indicators of menstruation, they tend to view the woman as less attractive and competent.

Along with the concealment of menstruation, the requirement of secrecy dictates how, where and with whom we can speak about menstruation (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Kissling, 1996a; Koff, Rierdan, & Sheingold, 1982). Society creates a social taboo around discussing menstruation around, and especially with, men. While in New Zealand the puberty education classes consist of both male and female students (Agnew, 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000), Newton (2012) describes British North Midland's female only classes that enforced silence when a male student entered the room. Both Fahs (2013), during her Arizona State undergraduate course and Chrisler (2013) a United States college professor, report male students dropping out of university papers when they discover menstruation will be discussed. The stigma around menstruation regulating male involvement and acknowledgement remains strong. This imposed gender division, combined with the constructed ideas of shame mentioned earlier, work to create an "officially sanctioned discourse which offers boys opportunities to practise male power by ridiculing women" (Diorio & Munro, 2000, p. 351). In her assessment of online social

media, Thornton (2013) found that menstruating women are faced with misogyny, anger and violence. Indeed, there is a “perceived reality... that menstrual women are to be regarded as whores; as unclean and disgusting and appropriate victims of retaliation” (Thornton, 2013, p. 1147). However, she also found many women embraced the stereotype of the emotionally out of control and potentially violent menstruating woman. This could be seen as maintaining and contributing to the dominant discourses of the menstruating woman, but possibly creating a way to appear powerful and find a moment of potential agency within the discourse (Allen, et al., 2011; Thornton, 2013). Allen et al. (2011) in examining the written narrative of 23 undergraduate male students, report girls using menstruation to fluster and embarrass boys as a way to gain power and Thornton (2013) noted some women found the ‘out of control’ message allowed them to act outside the usual constraints imposed by the ideal of femininity .

Dominantly constructed as bothersome and disruptive to the ideal femininity, the medical, pharmaceutical, and menstrual product industries present and promote ways to control or eliminate the signs and symptoms of menstruation or indeed menstruation all together (Chrisler, 2013; Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003; Johnston-Robledo, Barnack, & Wares, 2006). Women are told their experiences of menstruation are unacceptable and need to be ‘fixed’. The emotional disruption and upheaval, a possible component of menstruation for some women, is taught as a natural part of menstruation, but at the same time conceptualised as an illness (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Diorio & Munro, 2000). According to a United States study, increasingly, pre-menstrual and menstrual distress, negative emotions and ‘moods’ are being constructed as a biopsychiatric disorder requiring medical and pharmaceutical interventions (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003). A ‘true and acceptable’ woman is one that has managed to hide or eliminate all aspects of menstruation. The menstruating woman is not the real woman, but rather someone bad and in need of management or remedy (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003; Ussher & Perz,

2013). This idea of remedy has developed into eliminating menstruation completely. Repta and Clarke (2013) of 12 Canadian women report that advocates for menstrual suppression argue that menstruation has become increasingly obsolete. Tying menstruation almost exclusively with reproduction, the promoters of suppression point to the smaller number of pregnancies and longer stretches between pregnancies as an indication that the vast number of menstrual cycles are unnecessary. They also claim that women dislike menstruation as they find it embarrassing and inconvenient. Johnston-Robledo et.al. (2006) US study also report the promotion of suppression claims that menstruation was an inconvenience that stepped many women from fully experiencing their lives. These arguments appear to present feminists discourses of 'freedom', 'choice' and 'control', however the researchers point out that they can also be read as perpetuating and reinforcing many of the societal messages about menstruation (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2006; Repta & Clarke, 2013). While it is important that women have the right and ability to make personal decisions about their bodies, including the potential of menstrual suppression, understanding about menstrual suppression needs to move beyond reproduction of dominant discourses about menstruation, and also be supported by rigorous empirical research into the effects of pharmaceutically suppression (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2006).

Very little research into menstruation has occurred in the New Zealand context. The Diorio and Munro (2000) article on the teaching of menstruation within New Zealand schools provided the seminal inspiration for my earlier research into this area (Agnew, 2012). But it appears to be the only research that considers the current social and cultural construction of menstruation. However, this should not be taken to mean different cultural and social factors do not affect our understandings of menstruation. Murphy (2011), in her New Zealand Masters of Arts' thesis, discusses how colonial influence of misogyny and Judeo-Christian beliefs were imposed on the Māori constructs

of womanhood to create a narrative of female inferiority. Her view proposes indigenous practices celebrating menstruation as socially, personally and spiritually powerful were distorted and/or corrupted by imposed colonial ideology. This view may also be present in how we construct 'menstrual huts', special women's only spaces for menstruating women found in other cultures (Kissling, 1996a). The Western Judeo-Christian discourse often constructs these around the idea of female pollution and unacceptability, creating a negative view and treatment of menstruation. However, within other cultures these spaces provide an opportunity for spiritual meditation and practice as well as providing respite from the responsibilities and requirements of community life. In this way, the time of menstruation becomes about celebrating and honouring womanhood (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Murphy, 2011). Along with ethnic and cultural influences, social class appears to have an impact on how menstruation is perceived. Martin (1987, cited in Jackson & Falmagne, 2013) posits that working class women react to menstruation with less ambivalence and tend to view it more as a rite of passage rather than their middle-class counterparts. She suggests middle class women's ambivalence towards menstruation can be attributed to the juxtaposition of the requirement to contribute to the productive labour market and their need to fulfil the subject position of woman. Along with social class, Jackson and Falmagne (2013) from talking with 13 young American women, posit that lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to have a positive attitude towards menstruation. They suggest this may be a result of same sex partners being more understanding and supportive in relation to menstrual changes and effects. Fahs' (2011) interview with 40 women across a range of age, race and sexual orientation backgrounds supports this with her observations that lesbian and bisexual women are more likely to report positive experiences and beliefs related to their menstruating body.

## **Menstruation and puberty education**

In looking at how we teach puberty within sexuality education, I soon discovered a lack in material specific to the puberty phase of sexual maturation. Research into the teaching of puberty appears to have been overlooked within the majority of information produced in the areas of sexuality education. When puberty is discussed as a topic the issues of teaching is often included as an aside. United States college professor, Chrisler (2013) indicates that societal beliefs and individual reactions may lead many educators, including university professors, to wanting to change or even completely avoid the topic of menstruation. This socially constructed stigma may contribute to a lack of literature in this area. However, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, I consider puberty to be part of the broader category of sexuality education Therefore I have drawn upon research conducted in the areas of sex and sexuality education. I believe as they are all considered “sensitive” topics, they may all possess and benefit from the same investigations and teaching proposals.

Sexuality education, including menstruation is often considered a “sensitive” topic (Allen, 2009; Buston, Wight, & Scott, 2001; Trimble, 2009). Many teachers view sexuality education as a risky business (e.g. Buston et al., 2001; Duffy, Fotinatos, Smith, & Burke, 2013; Goldman & Coleman, 2013; Munro & Ballard, 2004). The social construction of sexuality imposes discourse of privacy, danger, and moral judgement (Allen, 2009: Buston et al., 2001). In a study of Australian secondary school health educators, teachers are often required to navigate the moral and ethical concerns of parents, schools and society, while at the same time providing students with a solid foundation of knowledge that supports emotional and physical sexual maturity (Ollis, 2010). Australian health teachers report having to negotiate parental concerns and objections (Duffy et al., 2013; Goldman & Coleman, 2013) as well as a political and social agenda that requires sexuality education to protect children’s sexual innocence whilst producing

'good' sexual citizens (Trimble, 2009; Vavrus, 2009). For these reasons, teachers often describe teaching sexuality as difficult (Agnew, 2012; Buston & Hart, 2001). However, teachers do not sit outside of discourses of privacy and morality that on sexuality, and therefore sexuality education, and therefore have to contend with the problematic issues and anxieties associated with explorations of sexuality (Buston et al., 2001; Munro & Ballard, 2004).

Some research into the delivery of sexuality education presents teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards sexuality as one of the major influences in creating a successful sexuality education teaching programme (Allen, 2009; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Duffy et al., 2013; Munro & Ballard, 2004; Ollis, 2010). A New Zealand study into teaching puberty showed teachers are often viewed or expected to behave as "value-neutral", able to deliver impartial information. However, teachers' values and beliefs are often shared through the choices of what and what not to discuss. Students will often pick up on the attitudes of their teachers, not just in what they say, but also from what is omitted and through teachers' body language and role-modelling (Munro & Ballard, 2004). This may lead to students describing their teachers as "'moralistic and judgemental', embarrassed to provide detailed information" (Allen, 2009, p. 34). Sexuality education requires teachers to be comfortable with the material and their own sexual subjectivity (Allen, 2009; Buston et al., 2001). However, many teachers report feeling inadequately prepared for the challenges presented in teaching sexuality (Duffy et al., 2013; Ollis, 2010).

Australian teachers report feeling pressure to conform to the requirements of parents and educational bureaucracy, both within their schools and the larger governmental sphere. As a society we have high expectations that teachers will provide sexuality education that promotes sexual health and personal well-being in a safe environment



(Goldman & Coleman, 2013; Ollis, 2010). At the same time, many teachers report feeling inadequately prepared to meet these diverse and often contradictory requirements. The lack of adequate academic training is listed as one of the major factors contributing to the “difficulty” of the subject (Buston et al., 2001; Ollis, 2010; Vavrus, 2009). Teachers also feel there was little opportunity to explore their own sexual identities and understandings prior to being required to teach the topic. They believed this opportunity to explore the diversity of sexuality and how they are positioned has a positive impact on their ability to set up supportive learning environments (Duffy et al., 2013; Vavrus, 2009).

However, even with the lack of teacher preparation, and its construction as a controversial topic, sexuality education provides vital knowledge and meaningful learning about living as sexual beings (Goldman & Coleman, 2013; Trimble, 2009). The idea of teaching sexuality education posits the development of reflective knowledge of physical and emotional sexual wellbeing (Buston et al., 2001; Goldman & Coleman, 2013). Looking at heterosexism and homophobia in 25 Scottish schools, Buston et al., (2001) found sexuality education is often broken into three categories: cognitive, the learning of facts and knowledge; affective, exploration of feelings and values; and behavioural, the development of communication and decision-making skills. The affective aspect of teaching can present the biggest challenge for teachers. The focus on the technical knowledge can exclude or marginalise the diversity of socio-cultural and personal experiences, attitudes and values as well as privileging heterosexual reproductive positioning of sexuality (Buston et al., 2001; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Vavrus, 2009). In discussing a holistic pedagogy of sexualities Trimble (2009) states “In regards to sexualities, the *unspoken* soon becomes *un-thinkable*, and the *un-thought* then struggles for recognition of its own existence in the public sphere” (p. 56). Working in the intersections of race, culture, gender, and sexuality within US teacher education,

Asher (2007) found by fostering a self-reflective engagement, teachers can open up meaningful opportunities to rethink the constructions of sexuality and challenge the notions of silence often inherent in sexuality education. In this regard, sexuality education has the potential to break silences and disrupt dominant discourses by encouraging active engagement (Asher, 2007; Chrisler, 2013).

While sexuality education has the potential to expose and investigate diversity (Asher, 2007), there is also the potential for the reinforcement of the narrowly defined good sexual citizen (Trimble, 2009). As Trimble (2009) points out, one of the unarticulated goals of sexuality education is to teach young people to conform to the ideals of “good” sexual citizenship. This construction of ‘good’ often requires a strict adherence to a simplified, heterosexual reproductive creation of sexuality:

Riding sidecar with the stated curriculum in sexualities pedagogy is a host of hidden lessons, including the ‘right’ way to engage with femininity, masculinity and gender codes, which sexualities are ‘normal and who (and what) the Other is and how to respond to them (Trimble, 2009, p. 58).

Our teaching of sexuality runs the risk of ignoring and silencing all complexity and contradictions that are part of the students’ real experience (Asher, 2007; Trimble, 2009). Perhaps due to the unease many people feel about teaching sexuality education to young people, there is often an attempt to claim the purpose of this education is about protection from unwanted pregnancy (Diorio & Munro, 2000). However, by positioning sexuality education as a means to control social problems, and a belief in the importance of sticking to the facts, our teaching becomes focused on the dangers and risks of sexuality (Diorio & Munro, 2000). Teaching is never a politically neutral action and young people have an awareness of the hegemonic requirement to conform to the presented ideal of ‘good sexual citizen’ and the potential costs of straying from it (Trimble, 2009).

### **Puberty Education within the New Zealand Curriculum**

Within New Zealand, the “New Zealand Curriculum is a statement of official policy relating to teaching and learning in English-medium New Zealand schools” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). Prior to the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum, each subject had its own curriculum document, with puberty and sexuality education residing within the Health and Physical Education in New Zealand Curriculum. While this document has been superseded by the 2007 curriculum document, it did provide greater depth to the policy around puberty and sexuality education. In the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum it states that sexuality education is one of the seven key areas and that all of these areas are to be included at both primary and secondary levels. It also states that schools are expected to “consult with their communities when developing health and sexuality education programmes” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 22). These statements are now the extent to which the New Zealand curriculum specifically addresses sexuality education, however, it remains placed within the broader category of health education.

The 2007 New Zealand Curriculum document states that students will “develop competencies for ... reproductive health and positive sexuality” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 23). And while it no longer lays out the details of what these competencies would require, it does outline “four underlying and interdependent concepts at the heart of this learning area” (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 22). They included a Māori philosophy of wellbeing. This unique framework of Hauora comprises of four pillars, physical, mental and emotional, social, and spiritual wellbeing. Secondly, health promotion sets out to develop and maintain supportive physical and emotional environments and involves students in personal and collective action. Another key concept is the socio-economic perspective that works to promote students own wellbeing and that of other people and society by understanding the interrelationships that exist. Finally, building a positive, responsible attitude, care and concern for other

people and the environment, and a sense of social justice makes up the fourth concept of attitudes and values. Each of these four concepts can be applied to the teaching of puberty and sexuality education (Ministry of Education, 2007).

In 2001, the Ministry of Education published “Health and Physical Education: The Curriculum in Action – Positive Puberty” (Ministry of Education, 2001). The information in this document can still be accessed online at the Ministry of Education’s TKI website Curriculum in Action: Positive Puberty (Ministry of Education, n.d.). In quoting the Health and Physical Education in New Zealand Curriculum document, it lays out the view that:

Sexuality education is a lifelong process. It provides students with the knowledge, understanding, and skills to develop positive attitudes towards sexuality, to take care of their sexual health, and to enhance their interpersonal relationships, now and in the future. (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 38)

As the website still links to the 1999 document, the information may be considered obsolete. However, as the material remains on the TKI site, available to teachers, it could be seen as a potential resource. According to this material, sexuality education’s key concepts for puberty require students to develop knowledge of the changes that come with puberty and demonstrate strategies to manage these changes. The document also presents the expectation that students examine the factors influencing their choices and develop a positive attitude towards the changes they are experiencing (Ministry of Education, n.d.).

Finally, the Ministry of Education in 2015 produced a document called “Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, boards of trustees and teachers” (Ministry of Education, 2015). The overall aim of the guide is to support the effective delivery of quality sexuality education programmes that support positive and holistic development and health of all students in New

Zealand primary, intermediate and secondary schools. While this extensive document covers teaching sexuality education from year one to year thirteen, its Level 3 (years 6-8) outline developing knowledge of puberty and in relation to this research, has recognising media social media, and consumer influences” as a suggested learning intention (Ministry of Education, 2015, p. 16). The Sexuality Education: A guide for principals, boards of trustees and teachers” document lays out that in compliance with the National Education Guidelines, schools are legally required to support students’ learning in sexuality education by providing programmes which enable students to realise their full potential, ensure equality of educational opportunity for all New Zealanders, identifying and providing appropriate support for those students with special needs, and respecting the diverse ethnic and cultural heritage of the New Zealand people. Section 60B of the Education Act 1989 requires the Board of Trustees to consult with the school community once every two years on the implementation of the health education component of the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2015).

### **Advertising menstruation**

The images and messages within an advertisement must adhere to the social and cultural constructions of the world (Agnew & Sandretto, 2016; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). While idealised and sanitised, they are reproductions of how people perceive their world, the objects, experiences and meanings that seem obvious and natural. In doing so, advertising also creates and reinforces our discursively constructed view of society (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). In a critique of the representation of menstruation in every day Spanish and British society, Docherty (2010) shows how many of the dominant discourses are (re)presented and reinforced as normal within menstrual advertising:

[...] shares many of the tell-tale oppressive qualities of menstrual advertising.  
 Refer to fluid instead of menstrual blood - check. Show blue liquid instead of a representative or realistic color [sic] - check. Depict the products as a “magical”

solution - check. Assume that women want any sign of menstruation to disappear  
- check. Use language referencing a scientific level of menses management and  
“absorption” - check. Use white backdrop that alludes to the purity of life without  
menstruation - check. Super skinny, glamorized model - check. (Docherty, 2010,  
p. 13)

The decision made about the depictions of menstruation in advertising are not neutral (Sandretto and the Critical Literacy Research Team, 2006). They work to (re)produce dominant discourses of shame and secrecy, promoting their product as the only way to ensure a woman complies with the discursive regulations on the menstruating body (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Erchull, 2013). These advertisements and other forms of texts, for example websites targeted at young girls, produced by menstrual product companies held little useful information (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009).

New Zealand research (Agnew, 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000) found the vast majority of resource material available in New Zealand schools was created and supplied by menstrual product companies. This also appears to be the case internationally and often sources of information such as websites and magazine articles are produced, or at least greatly influenced, by the companies (Fingerson, 2006; Kissling, 2006; Mazzarella, 2008). While these resources may provide useful material for teachers and young people, it should be noted that the production of this material promotes purchasing, and ideally brand loyalty, of a particular company's product. These resources, along with the other forms of advertising (re)produce the dominant discursive construction of menstruation, therefore contributing to, and maintaining a highly regulated and often negative view of menstruation (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Kissling, 2006). As discussed earlier in this chapter, discourses of shame and secrecy create a dominant construction

of menstruation that requires women to work hard to keep menstruation hidden and their bodies aligned with regulations of acceptable femininity (Allen, et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006; Schooler et al., 2005)

Young people gain information from a variety of other sources, however the majority of these sources still continuously (re)produce dominant discourses of shame and secrecy. Most menstrual product companies produce websites directed at young women and teenagers. An abundance of menstrual product advertising on television and magazine also bombards young people with particular constructed meanings of menstruation. While many advertisements appear to be providing instruction and information, Del Saz-Rubio and Pennock-Speck's (2009) analysis of the menstrual product advertisements in Spain and Britain found there was little useful information to be found. Instead they mostly perpetuated negative attitudes and views about menstruation. For example, they report that when humour is used in the ads they reviewed it came from male interaction with the products, while the women remained serious. This construction of menstruation, potentially, presents an understanding that menstruation should be considered a dire experience that women need only be serious about. Also the amusement at men's lack of knowledge reinforced a belief that information about menstruation should be kept away from men. Likewise, Mazzarella (2008) studying websites for girls entering puberty proposes that the main purpose of these websites produced by menstrual products companies was to market their product so the content often focused on messages of secrecy and hygiene.

Menstrual product advertising and their 'educational' media reflect and (re)create the dominant social and cultural views on menstruation. This constricts what they may present, but also acts as an advantage to sell their products. By using the constructed

discourse that menstruation creates a shameful hygiene problem needing to be managed, menstrual product companies create and promote products to reinforce and magnify that issue (Raftos et al., 1998; Simes & Berg, 2001). Companies often present their products as the best, or indeed only way to combat the hygiene crisis menstruation creates. Indeed, marketing will often imply that without their products a woman's body will be out of control and the woman will fail at maintaining the appropriate, acceptable image of femininity (Raftos et al., 1998). Recognising and using the discursively constructed fear tells us not only to buy their product, but also how to react and interact, as well as the acceptable subject positions, rules and values (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). In this way "advertising and society are closely intertwined as advertising portrays the established social order, while society with its value and beliefs finds ways of recreating itself with the discourse of advertising" (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009, p. 2536). Therefore, discussing and analysing advertisements, as this thesis proposes, may offer an avenue to understand and make visible how we construct menstruation.

Menstrual product advertising presents images that conform to and maintain the discursive rules of menstruation. One way of (re)producing the constructed meaning of menstruation advertisements focus on the presentation of a stylised ideal of femininity. Advertisements often present an image of femininity to provide 'proof' their products are the ideal way to conform with social expectations. This ideal feminine subject is fresh, clean, dressed in light coloured, tight clothing and often appearing sexually available (Erchull, 2013; Merskin, 1999; Simes & Berg, 2001). In presenting this image, menstrual product companies say that their product eliminates the negative effects of menstruation and enables women to appear in an acceptable and appropriate manner. In this way, the advertisements actually contribute to, rather than disrupt the dominant discourses of shame and menstruation as an attack on femininity. Women, advertisements tell us,



must sublimate the femaleness of their bodies so as to appear normal and natural (Kane, 1990; Merskin, 1999). In reading the visual and linguistic text of menstrual product advertising, it may appear to be saying that the constraints imposed on menstruating women no longer apply. But another reading that conforms to the dominant social construction still constitutes femaleness as something to be hidden and denied. Menstrual product advertising works on how we are constituted with people “developing, monitoring and molding their identities with respect to unrealistic ideals promoted by consumer culture through advertising” (Dittmar, 2007 cited in Hill, 2011, p. 354). With menstrual product advertising presenting their products as the only way to achieve the prescribed ideals of femininity, they not only encourage women to rely on their products, but also insist on the development and maintenance of a certain type of feminine expression, in this case, the clean, fresh often sexually available woman.

Within this presentation of the ideal femininity, menstrual product advertising also constitutes female sexual embodiment (Erchull, 2013; Simes & Berg, 2001). Advertisements often use female sexuality to sell their products. However, menstrual product advertising must negotiate using sexualised femininity, while avoiding a connection with female corporeal nature (Erchull, 2013). Erchull (2013) explains how menstrual product advertisements use a ‘Terror Management Theory’ to sanitise the females in their advertisements. By removing any indication of their corporeality, and using disidentifiers such as white clothing, these advertisements are able to present women that are still considered sexually attractive. But to do so the woman must not have any obvious connection to menstruation. For these advertisements to be deemed as socially and culturally acceptable, there must be no overt visible signs of menstruation (Erchull, 2013; Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013). In examining the promotion of menstruation suppression, Johnston-Robledo et al. (2006), found that in Western society women are often sexualised or objectified as their bodies. However, when

women fail to conform to perceptions of sexual attractiveness or desirability, or present bodily functions that are deemed incompatible with this image they are often considered a failure or unacceptable (Thornton, 2013). Women face often violent and offensive derision when menstruation becomes visible (Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013; Thornton, 2013), and are taught to police their own bodies to hide the signs of menstruation (Johnston-Robledo et al., 2006; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Merskin, 1999).

Along with advertising, the marketing of menstrual products through packaging and innovations sets out to create a profit and brand loyalty through the use of dominant social and cultural beliefs about menstruation (Erchull, 2013; Merskin, 1999). Menstrual product companies often design packaging with light 'feminine' colours: pinks, pale blues and purples, and floral designs. The overtly feminine designs can be read as reassurance that the product will counteract the 'unfeminising' effect of menstruation (Block Coutts & Berg, 1993). While U by Kotex's neon and black colour palette appears to break from this construct, it may be read as the company's attempt to position itself within a younger market. For young people, brand loyalty is not just about purchasing a specific product, but also accepting and imposing a common reality and a notion of 'coolness' with a particular brand (Hill, 2011; Kenway & Bullen, 2001). This packaging also provides a sense of invisibility, or at least camouflage to menstrual products. In changing from see-through plastic to opaque and/or patterned wrappers, menstrual product companies are, at least, trying to create an illusion of invisibility that may help remove the stigma associated with menstrual products (Block Coutts & Berg, 1993; Fingerson, 2006; Simes & Berg, 2001). Being discovered with menstrual products is claimed to be one of the most humiliating experiences for many women, therefore the newly designed wrappers may divert or even eliminate the attention and embarrassment (Block Coutts & Berg, 1993; Roberts, Goldenberg, Power, & Pyszczyński, 2002; Simes

& Berg, 2001). Menstrual product companies also create and promote constant innovations for their products (Kissling, 2006; Mazzearella, 2008). Some of these innovations that occurred in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were significant improvements, for example, disposability, internal protection and adhesive strips (Kissling, 2006). However, many of the more recent innovations, for example superior fibres and specially shaped pads, appear more about creating a market and selling a greater percentage of products (Kissling, 2006; Mazzearella, 2008). Mazzearella (2008) found products for menstrual cramps were suggested as an essential need for the menstruating girl. Online sites and advertisements also promoted the use of panty liners to protect against and manage the daily vaginal discharge, therefore turning a natural and normal occurrence into something that needs intervention and policing (Berg & Block Coutts, 1994; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Mazzearella, 2008).

### **Critical literacy**

A 'back to basics' approach focuses on repetition and replication to learn to recognise and decode words (Harwood, 2008). This traditional view of literacy learning often envisions the student as an 'empty vessel' that needs to be filled with skills of reading and writing (Ghiso, Spencer, Ngo, & Campano, 2013; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Literacy learning typically avoided any issues beyond the basic skills of learning to read. Issues of personal or socio-political importance are seldom explored or even actively discouraged (Harwood, 2008) Literacy pedagogy often remains "restricted to formalized, monolingual, monocultural, and rule-governed forms of language" (The New London Group, 1996, p. 61).

Critical literacy does not invalidate the need for understanding and competency in using the representational forms of reading and writing. Instead it takes a wider view of literacy to consider questions about the construction of a text, and the input and impact of both author and reader (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Critical literacy also provides “new and varied ‘lenses’ to understand experiences, explore multiple viewpoints, and uncover the influence of socio-political and power relationships in shaping perceptions and actions” (Harwood, 2008, p. 1). In doing so it allows us to see how some discourses and viewpoints maintain their dominance, while others are marginalised and/or dismissed.

Literacy is political (Freire, 1996). Literacy reflects power relationships. Literacy constructs our understandings of our social, cultural, economic and political lives. As Harwood (2008) in referencing Freire puts it, critical literacy teaches us to “read the world and the word” (p. 3). According to Woodcock (2009) look into online teacher education, we undervalue the role literacy has in sculpting our subjectivities and roles in society. Critical literacy supports us to engage with texts in order to pay attention to how we are being constituted (Harwood, 2008; Norton, 2011; Woodcock, 2009). When we start to teach critical literacy, teachers often seek out texts that contain clear themes to address (Sandretto, 2006). Presenting stories that contain or address issues such as gender, class, ethnicity often appear to be the easiest entry into a critical literacy pedagogy. However, as Sandretto (2011) points out current publishing standards make it harder to find overt examples of these discursive themes. However, if teachers actively engage with critical literacy, examining and challenging their own processes and practices of thinking, this may enable them to identify the ways to analyse a variety of texts (Woodcock, 2009). All texts that we engage with are purposely constructed, with the aim to represent a particular worldview and/or influence our understanding of the world and ourselves (Babalioutas & Papadopoulou, 2007). Therefore, no text is ever neutral

(Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). A critical literacy approach to the texts we engage with provides both teachers and learners an opportunity to challenge dominant power relations and act towards transforming their environment (Harwood, 2008; Souto-Manning, 2009).

With an understanding of the diversity of text, and critical literacy as a tool to promote social justice (Harwood, 2008; Norton, 2011; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011), we can begin to see beyond the English lesson and work across the curriculum. This project will investigate using critical literacy to teach within the Positive Puberty unit. Other researchers and teachers have implemented the use of critical literacy across the curriculum (Ashcraft, 2012; Darvin, 2007; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011; Yang, 2009). Texts are a part of any curriculum area, therefore we can implement critical literacy practice to enhance and expand teaching and learning in a variety of areas (Darvin, 2007; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011; Yang, 2009). Sandretto (2011) and Jakubiak and Mueller (2014) both report on engaging with critical literacy within a science lesson. Jakubiak and Mueller showed how an examination of advertising promoting 'green' products can be used to investigate and critique various political and economic organisations' commitment to ecological issues. In her book, Sandretto (2011) also reports on how, in one lesson, letters discussing the potential draining of local wetlands were used to create multiple readings and a critical analysis of the environmental issue. As Darvin (2007) points out,

“[e]mphases placed on textbooks, correct answers, multiple choice or other short answer forms of assessment, and an overall prioritizing of “covering content” over “having time to address questions and differing points of view” have made math and science students, as a whole, more resistant to the idea of incorporating critical literacy into their teaching” (p. 255).

However, Yang (2009) reports that creating a critical literacy component that presents issues of gendered and ethnically diverse maths learners, the oppressive nature of institutional mathematics and application of math to social justice for example, “illuminated critical thinking, mathematical reasoning and method, and conceptual mastery” (p. 111). When we, as educators and teachers, create lessons that explore complex issues of power and constructed knowledge from multiple perspectives, the teaching can potentially promote questioning, experimentation and transformation regardless of the curriculum area (Darvin, 2007; Harwood, 2008).

This project’s attempt to promote this type of exploration and critical thinking will utilise a number of visual texts. As stated earlier, critical literacy is not limited to the traditional written forms of text such as stories and poetry. The visual text, for example, artwork, photography and advertisements, provide opportunities for a critical literacy lessons. Critical literacy asks the same questions of a visual text; what purpose did the author have in producing it? What choices did the author make? Who is present? Who is missing? What sort of work does the text represent? What assumptions are made about the reader? For example, Janks (2012) argues the photographer of the 2010 World Press Photo of the Year made specific choices to tell her story. Jodi Bieber, the photographer, presented a portrait of Bibi Aisha, an Afghan woman whose nose and ears were cut off for running away from her husband’s abusive home. By having Bibi Aisha look out at us, she demands us to engage, rather than see her as a passive object. But also by choosing a young attractive woman, the photograph makes use of discourses of youth and beauty. The photograph, with its choices of portrayal of skin colour and clothing also directs the viewer to make assumptions on ethnicity and religion. Janks (2012) shows how the photograph used on a popular magazine cover produced a political and social construction to match a certain ideology. Janks argues that by using it on their cover, with added text, *Time Magazine* removes, or reduces

Aisha's agentic demands of engagement with her, and instead makes her a passive victim of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan. This importantly shows that images are never neutral, even photographs that may appear to be simply showing actual events and people are creating and recreating social, cultural and political discourses. The images we see often, in magazines, in advertising, in news reports, all present a discursively constructed view that often occurs without acknowledgement (Babalioutas & Papadopoulou, 2007; Browett, 2002). Babalioutas and Papadopoulou (2007) working with primary school students in Greece believe the education system does not contribute enough to produce citizens that are critically and visually literate. Young people are not just mindless dupes (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999), but able to benefit from the skills of critical literacy to read and critique media and visual imagery (Alvermann et al., 1999; Babalioutas & Papadopoulou, 2007; Browett, 2002). By using a variety of texts, that include popular images, critical literacy can be applied to how people live their lives within the abundance of texts that influence them daily (Alvermann et al., 1999).

Finally, implementing critical literacy is not always easy (Kempe, 2001; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). The process requires a critique and challenge of many of the dominant social and cultural constructions. Critical literacy can promote a discussion of multiple readings and different voices rather than locating the correct answer (Kempe, 2001; Souto-Manning, 2009). However, in promoting multiple readings there is always a possibility of readings that present and recreate the dominant constructed meaning and maintain the power imbalance (Kempe, 2001; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). If no reading is incorrect, then how, as teachers and facilitators, do we deal with readings that promote inequity and bias? As Kempe (2001) indicates, there is no simple solution to this. But in encouraging a critical literacy approach, we need to remain reflexive. We need to consider "[w]hat diversity do we silence in the name of liberatory pedagogy"

(Ellsworth 1989, cited in Kempe, 2001, p. 41). In an attempt to make visible and challenge gender inequality, what ethnic or cultural issues do we discount? In making one group's voice heard, do we silence another's? (Kempe, 2001) We may unwittingly reproduce a practice of silencing and negating the variety of possible readings. So the purpose of a critical literacy approach is not to remove interpretations that appear to recreate dominant discourses, but to show them in action. By investigating how these readings are created and giving authority, we get to see the ways text contribute to, and serve powerful cultural institutions (Gilbert, 2001). Therefore critical literacy is not the teacher modelling or approving a message that is deemed liberating or empowering. But instead, it encourages the reader to consider how and why they respond to a text and if there may be a different reading (Kempe, 2001). However, these different readings may not always sit comfortably with others. Critical literacy often requires us, author and reader, to examine once comfortable practices and values, and question the authority and influence in them (Woodcock, 2009). In her work with sexuality and gender, Norton (2011) found that while creating and examining texts encouraged students to disrupt ideologies that confined them and others, it also resulted negative criticism from others. In creating a critical literacy curriculum, teachers should be aware of potential consequences for students. Critical literacy promotes social justice, a call to investigate social and cultural issues and act towards change, which does not always sit comfortably (Ashcraft, 2012; Gilbert, 2001; Norton, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

As discussed in this chapter, dominant discourses construct menstruation as a hygiene crisis to be managed and concealed. These messages tell us women need to feel embarrassed about their bodies and menstruating, and men should feel uncomfortable and negative towards menstruation. Menstrual product companies recreate these



meanings when advertising their product, but also find their advertisements constrained by the social and cultural discursive rules of menstruation. While mothers are still the primary source of information for girls about menstruation, advertising and menstrual product companies produce information, for example websites and advice pages in magazines, are increasingly used by young women for information. This project presents critical literacy as a tool to learn about menstruation, but also as a way to think critically about the messages presented by menstrual product company material. Critical literacy explores the multiple readings of many texts and how they recreate and/or challenge dominant discourses that construct our social and cultural worlds. While often associated with the written texts of an English curriculum, I have shown that critical literacy can be applied to a variety of texts, including visual media and is applicable across the curriculum. The knowledge of menstruation and menstrual product advertisements, and a pedagogy of critical literacy, will form the basis of this research on how using the techniques of critical literacy to examine menstrual product advertising may affect the take up or challenge of the dominant construction of menstruation.

## Chapter Four: Research Design

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### Introduction

The examination of research literature in the previous chapter found that dominant discourses of secrecy, shame, and hygiene remained prevalent in the constructed meanings of menstruation (Allen et al., 2011; Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Newton, 2012). The research shows that these discourses continue to remain dominant in how we take up and understand menstruation (Allen et al., 2011; Thornton, 2013). It was argued that menstrual product companies draw upon, as well as reinforce, these discourses within their advertising (Erchull, 2013; Simes & Berg, 2001). By constituting menstruation as a shameful hygienic crisis they are able to show their products as the only viable option to maintain acceptable femininity. The ways we teach and learn about menstruation, and puberty and sexuality education in general, are important to examine, given the research reported in the previous chapter indicating the continuing construction of menstruation within dominant discourses. A study of the literature found the area of sexuality and puberty education to be under-researched and the teachers would often report feeling ill-prepared and uncomfortable with the teaching requirements (Buston et al., 2001; Ollis, 2010). The research reported in this thesis, investigating using a critical literacy approach in the teaching and learning of menstruation, shows the potential for the approach to open up wider understandings about menstruation and encourage social action (Harwood, 2008; Norton, 2011; Sandretto with Kleener, 2011).

On this foundation of previous research, I built this study. As no one sits outside of the constructive influence of dominant discourses, it was important for me to be aware of the ways myself and others were taking up the dominant discourses of menstruation. While accepting and respecting that for many, menstruation, and indeed puberty and sexuality education in general, was considered a sensitive and difficult topic, this

research also set out to challenge this construction and open up potential for a greater range of understandings about menstruation. To achieve this, I worked with teachers and their students to investigate their constructions of menstruation, and also investigated how a critical literacy approach would work in encouraging that exploration.

In this chapter, I lay out the process of the research. I begin with an overview of the umbrella of feminist methodology under which the research lies. In the feminist methodology section, I outline the traits, such as examination of power, working to affect change, providing diversity in representation and reflexive researcher, that make up this methodology (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992; Willis, 2007). The research was undertaken with a variety of qualitative methods, which allows for a variety of perspectives and experiences. After giving an overview of qualitative methods in general, I proceed to outline of the methods used and how I engaged with them in this research. I start with discussing the procedure of recruiting participants, before moving into the methods of data collection the participants and I engaged with. (See figure 1 for an overview of the research design).

The data collection started with a workshop that introduced the concepts of a critical literacy pedagogy. The teachers were given an opportunity to explore critical literacy and how it could be applied to menstrual product advertising texts as a part of a menstruation lesson within the puberty unit. After this workshop, the teachers returned for a second workshop where they collaboratively created the lesson plan that fit within their classroom style and requirements, as well as the purposes of my research. I was able to observe each of these lessons, creating detailed field notes and collecting classroom activity material. Prior to the lessons I interviewed a small group of six students from each lesson, asking about general thoughts and experiences of menstruation and

menstruation education. The same group of students were then interviewed following the lesson to get their opinions on the opinions on the critical literacy approach. At the end of the process, the teachers were also interviewed about their experiences and thoughts of both the workshops and the actual lessons. Transcripts of audio-recorded interviews and workshops, and the field notes and collected classroom material of the observed lessons comprised the data for analysis. In the next section I explain how I worked with discourse analysis to examine the collected data. Using a feminist poststructuralist stance I examined how the participants constructed meaning and understandings for themselves, and made visible the complexities and variations that made up these understandings of the world. From here I outline the ethics procedures. All research performed at Otago University must be considered and approved by the University of Otago Ethics Committee. Also, with a knowledge that menstruation is considered a sensitive topic, I wanted to ensure the integrity and safety of the research and of the participants. As stated, the topic of menstruation is often constructed as difficult, and I, as the researcher, am also constituted within the dominant discourses creating menstruation. Therefore, I discuss the importance of reflexivity during this research.

### **Feminist Methodology**

The research reported in this thesis explored the use of a critical literacy approach to the teaching and learning of menstruation within puberty education. Setting out to examine this lived experience and individual's perceptions of menstruation education, I placed this research within a feminist methodology (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). Feminist methodology encompassed a number of traits. Firstly, feminist research is concerned with issues of power (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Feminist

approaches to research question the ways knowledge is produced (Kenway et al., 1994, Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). Knowledge, and who has the power to determine what knowledge is privileged, becomes an integral part of feminist research (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002, St. Pierre, 2000). By highlighting the ways knowledge is created and maintained, feminist investigations are concerned, not just with finding meanings of cultural and social relations of gender, but in making visible and directly challenging the authority given certain discourses and constructed knowledge (Davis & Gannon, 2005, Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002; Reinharz, 1992). From this position, feminist methodology also requires the research and researcher to work towards affecting change (Flax, 1987, Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002, Reinharz, 1992). As discussed in chapter two about feminist poststructuralism, feminist methodology obligates the researcher to contribute to their world beyond the theoretical (Flax, 1987; Reinharz, 1992). The feminist researcher has a moral responsibility to contribute in some way that is practical as well as scholarly (Reinharz, 1992).

Feminist methodology seeks out to provide diversity in its representation (Reinharz, 1992; Willis, 2007). In creating an in-depth investigation on experience and knowledge, it is essential to actively make room for and seek out a variety of voices that represent different constructions of gender, ethnicity, ableism, sexuality and socio-cultural positioning. Likewise, when the diversity has not occurred within their participants, the feminist researcher acknowledges this limitation to their research (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Feminist researchers are often critical of research that overlooks or ignores the diversity within women (Reinharz, 1992). And in acknowledging the diversity of lenses that create understanding and impacted representation of knowledge, feminist research must also acknowledge how their own lens impact on the interpretation of that diversity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

In acknowledging how they interpret diversity in representation, feminist methodology requires the researcher to engage with an ongoing process of reflexivity (Jones, 1992; Pillow, 2003). Unlike a scientific approach of quantitative research, feminist methodology blurs the lines between observed and observer, researcher and research subject (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Willis, 2007). Feminist methodology rejects the notion that personal experience is irrelevant or contaminating, rather the researcher with their personal experiences are integrated into the report of the experience (Reinharz, 1992). As discussed in more detail at the end of this chapter, qualitative research requires the researcher to reflect critically on their part in the production of knowledge and write in ways that acknowledge their own constructed beliefs and experiences (Ramazanoglu with Holland, 2002). This idea of reflexive practice is a requirement of feminist theory and therefore a constant in my practices of engagement with feminist methodology and working with qualitative methods.

### **Qualitative methods**

Qualitative methods are a vast umbrella of different methods and approaches to describe both the routine and the problematic experiences in people's lives (Cresswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Within this research, I engaged with a range of data gathering methods; conducting workshops, observing lessons, and individual and focus group interviews, which are discussed in greater detail later in this chapter. The multi-method nature of qualitative research seeks out to develop an in-depth understanding of the researched phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Willis, 2007). It allows for multiple perspectives and experiences of participants without seeking out an objective reality to be captured and defined. Aligned with the poststructuralist theory outlined in chapter two, qualitative research does not assume there is a definable truth, instead it seeks to know the meaning of things through the ways people engage and represent

their experiences (St. Pierre, 2000; Willis, 2007). By using multiple methods, the qualitative researcher is able to engage with these experiences in a variety of ways that may not be as evident in a single method approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Willis, 2007).

Instead of an artificially constructed, simplified environment, qualitative methods operate within all the complexity, and potential complications of the real world (Willis, 2007). By using a variety of methods to create a series of representations, the qualitative researcher sets out to make the world visible (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Situated in the natural environment, qualitative methods seek out the diversity of different beliefs and practices in an attempt to make sense of the world, and the phenomena examined (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Willis, 2007). However, any understanding gained will always be an interpretative production (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). As someone who engages with qualitative methods through a poststructuralist lens, I recognise the meaning we place on our world is multiple and transitory, with different discourses shifting historically and culturally to inform our understanding (St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, the interpretative nature of qualitative research does not provide a clear view of lived experience but rather representations of the “worlds of – and between – the observer and the observed” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19).

### **Finding participants**

Before working with the participants, the researcher must navigate a number of steps. In the process of the research the biggest of these steps was working with the school gatekeepers (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Morrow & Richards, 1996). The school gatekeeper is often the principal, although this sometimes gets delegated to the school's

secretary or principal's personal assistant. Their role as gatekeeper focuses on maintaining the well-being and integrity of their school, teachers and students, as well as managing access and availability. The gatekeeper is an essential part of the community, and as a researcher wanting access to that community, the gatekeeper is someone I had to engage and negotiate within the course of finding participants. The first step meant sending letters of introduction to the school principals outlining the research and what I would require from participants (see Appendix A). These letters were originally sent to 25 schools that offered year seven and eight classes. Having experienced difficulty procuring participants during my Master's research, I expanded the school recruitment to include outside of the Dunedin area. Due to a reliance on public transport I contacted schools along the main transport route between Oamaru and Invercargill. Of these 25 schools a handful returned notes saying they would be declining, and two schools consented to take part in the research. After a couple of weeks, I made a point of contacting the schools I had not heard from, with the understanding sometimes things get lost in the piles of correspondences, and some gatekeepers may have questions and concerns I could address with further explanation of my research.

While a large portion of schools contacted simply declined without providing an explanation or stating they were too busy, a number of responses questioned the appropriateness of research into the areas of puberty and in particular, menstruation. One school queried the authenticity of the University's approval of my research as it "seems unlikely they would be allowing you to questions kids about this topic" (field notes). I politely informed him he could telephone the University of Otago's Ethics Committee on the number provided if he had any concerns and then thanked him for his time. While this was the most extreme reaction to my research topic, a number of schools (five from the first round of 25) expressed concern and were troubled by



menstruation being researched, questioning how teachers and parents may react. Burrows and Johnson (2005) also reported dealing with this resistance to allowing research into menstruation to take place in schools and other child-related institutions, such as the Girl Guides. The construction of secrecy attached to it, and may limit any possible investigation and challenge to how we teach and understand female sexual development.

During the process of working with the consenting participants, teachers from two schools decided to withdraw. One gave no reason; the other accepted a principal position in a North Island school. Due to this there were concerns of limited data to be able to make significant inferences. So I decide to do another round of school recruitment expanding the location area inland and further north into Canterbury. This new round of recruitment returned similar response. No new school agreed to participate and whilst again most did not give a reason for declining, issues of time required and the perceived sensitivity of the topic were stated by a few of the school gatekeepers. All participation in research is voluntary and therefore schools remain within their rights to decline for any or indeed no reason. However, research into teaching puberty and sexuality education strongly indicates that teachers would like more training in the skills and confidence required to teach the topic (Buston et al., 2001; Ollis, 2010; Wight & Buston, 2003). In addition, although all the participating teachers believed they were at a point with their teaching experiences to feel confident with the topic, they thought specific information would have been helpful earlier in their careers. One participant, on hearing the apparent lack of interest expressed her surprise, saying “most of my friends complain about the lack of PD [professional development], they feel like they are muddling through on their own” (Tina, Personal interview). A disconnect seems to occur between reported and anecdotal evidence suggesting a desire and need for professional development in the area of puberty and sexuality education, and a lack

of engagement on a practical level. This may indicate the strength of the discourses that construct menstruation as a difficult and problematic and create socially and culturally adhered to rules about silence and limited disclosure.

## **Participants**

Overall, 98 schools were approached with offers to participate. From that five teachers agreed to take part in the workshops. The ages ranged between 38 and 60, and one teachers identified as Pasifika and the other four as New Zealand European. Four of the teachers attended one set of workshops, while due to her location, one teacher took part in an individual workshop. All five teachers taught combination Year Seven - Eight (age 10-12) classes, with two teachers co-teaching one class. Each teacher had a minimum of five years teaching experience.

From each observed lesson a group of five to six students agreed to participate in the group interview. Each group consisted of approximately equal numbers of boys and girls across boy year seven and eight.

A detailed representation of participants' experiences and contributions guides the course and outcome of the research. A reflexive approach can aid in creating an accurate and respectful representation, but, perhaps with the exception of auto-ethnography, it is process always takes place from the outside. In this way the view of the 'other' remains interpretive, based on a particular view at a particular time, rather than definitive and the 'truth' (England, 1994). We ask participants to allow us into their lives and experiences, with an assumption these experiences will be examined and reported. While my research focused on the teaching/learning experiences rather than

the personal experiences of menstruation, I was still asking to come into the participating teachers' classrooms and take some of their time. I also asked them to consider, and perhaps challenge their ways of teaching and the construction of menstruation. With participants the source of information, researchers must be careful not to view them as objects to be mined and exploited (England, 1994). As Stanley and Wise (1993) remind us, "treating people like objects – sex objects or research objects – is morally unjustifiable" (p. 168). So instead of producing knowledge about them, I wanted the research to be about a 'we', the group of participants and I, creating understanding together.

This process of collaboration started with recruitment and the willing flexibility I took with those interested in participating. From discussions with fellow postgraduate students and my previous research experience (C. Agnew, 2012), participant recruitment often presents a major challenge. Teachers reported not having a lot of time to fit in the demands of research participation, especially with fitting in the research lessons with the established classroom routines. One teacher expressed this as one of her concerns. "And so we're all going to need to operate like the last, the last two or three days of a term by the time we do this prior teaching. That's my biggest concern" (Rose, Teachers' Critical Literacy Workshop 3). During my conversations, the teachers lamented the lack of time to participate in professional development. The teachers all valued opportunities to learn and develop their teaching skills but found "there just isn't the time you know, everything is focused on the classroom achievement, but there's so little support to become better at our jobs" (Tina, Teacher Interview). With this in mind, I made an effort to work within the teachers' busy schedules, complicated by school performances, job sharing and transient teaching, so each teacher was able to attend the workshops, and class lessons could be arranged so I could observe each separately. As the researcher, I anticipated needing to be flexible and accommodating with the data collection process,

however, I found participants engaged with the research eager and willing to accommodate my needs.

This also extended to the students involved. In one particular situation, the timing of the class lesson meant it finished right on the lunch break. I assumed I would not be able to perform the post-lesson interview with these students as I did not want to take their personal time, which had not been agreed to. However, on mentioning this during the first interview, all the students agreed to talk with me during their lunch break, apparently very invested in telling me their opinions of the lesson. So while teachers and schools often feel stretched for time, especially in a University city where numerous research projects are undertaken, I found being able to present the requirements in a flexible and engaging way often improves the willingness to participate.

## Data Collection Methods

### Data Collection Components

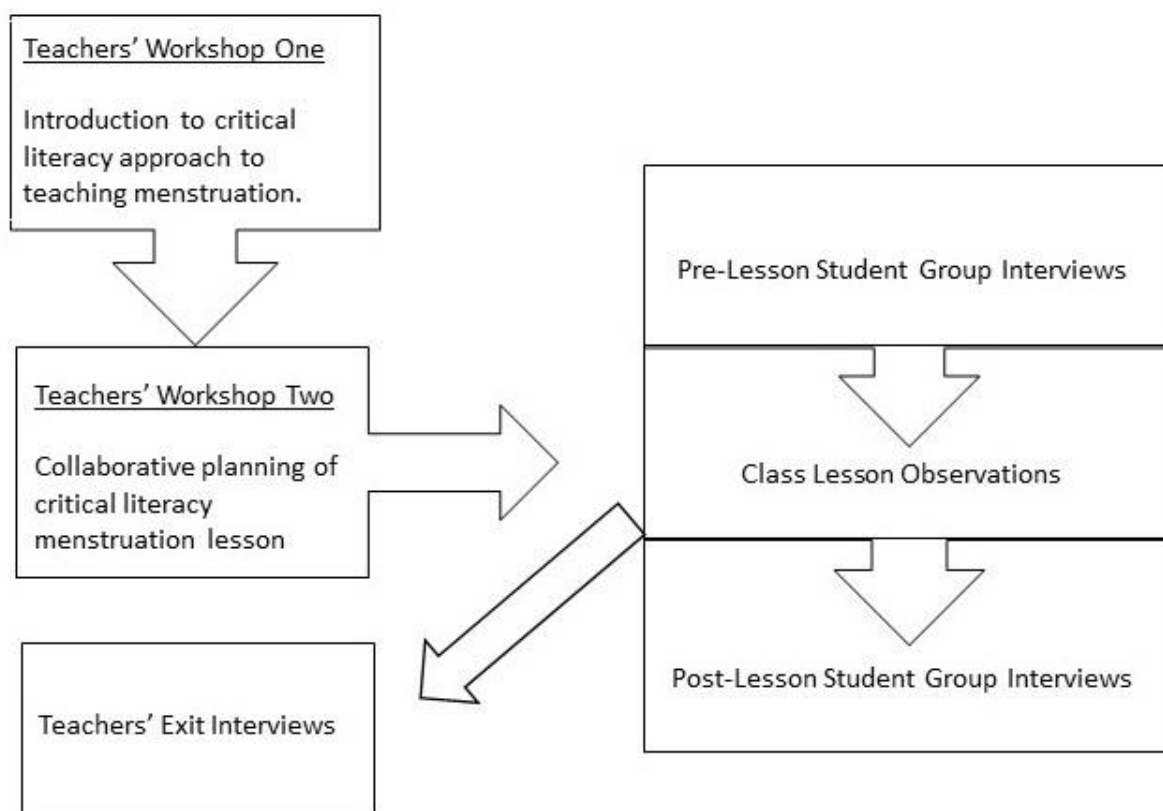


Figure 1 Data Collection Components

## Workshops

As shown in figure one, the field research started with a series of audio-recorded workshops. Originally, I had planned the workshops to be run jointly with all the teacher participants, however, location and time meant the workshops were organised per city. This also resulted in workshops where the teachers knew and worked with each other. The prior relationships may have impacted on the interactions the participants engaged

in. Friendships and working relationships may create a comfortable atmosphere to work and discuss the ideas around menstruation and the teaching of the puberty and sexuality programme. The established working relationship may encourage sharing of personal and professional experiences of teaching as the sense of comradery had already been established. However, it may also limited the degree participants feel like sharing as it removes anonymity. The participants may feel uncomfortable talking about menstruation, especially if they are positioned within discourses of silence and shame. This may be amplified by discussions occurring with colleagues they know and spend time with during their professional careers. Therefore, providing the opportunity of individual interviews offered a balance of public and private sharing.

The first of the workshops provided the participants an opportunity to investigate and discuss the ways menstruation is constructed within texts, how critical literacy could be a tool for recognising and critiquing those discourses, and open up the potential for alternative discursive constructions. The workshop started by locating the ideas of critical literacy within the literacy programme and its broader application across the curriculum. While this research focused on menstruation within the sexuality and puberty programme, the information within the workshop hopefully showed how critical literacy could be implemented in various other curriculum areas. The workshop focused on the critical literacy concept that all texts are socially constructed. As discussed in chapter three, literature, print and television advertisements often (re)create dominant discursive constructions of menstruation. By using these advertisements, the workshop examined how the choices of the author and the experiences of the reader work to recreate and maintain dominant discourses within the construction of mensuration. In making these constructions visible, critical literacy presents a tool to encourage both teachers and students to question and potentially challenge the dominant discourses (Agnew & Sandretto, 2016; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). While engaging in these

examinations of the texts, the workshops also showed how texts may have a variety of meanings and interpretations. Critical literacy suggests that there is more than one correct reading, and opens the space for different constructions.

The second workshop took the information about discourse and the construction of texts and developed a lesson plan structure. Together, the teacher participants and I built up a lesson plan around our previous discussions in the first workshop and the provided resources. Each teacher was provided with a number of advertisement texts, a set of possible questions [see appendix D] and lesson plan template [see appendix E]. I was not directive on which advertisements should be used, or how the lesson should be structured. Instead we discussed what I was looking to observe in the lesson and the teacher's own philosophy and expectations for the puberty lesson. There was some discussion of age-appropriateness of a couple of advertisements. I had included one advertisement, that I thought was a good example of challenging dominant discourses, but I believed would be too mature for the children, to which they teachers had agreed. Some of the teachers suggested another advert I supplied would be outside of the children's frame of understanding. The idea of appropriateness and understanding also came up later during the post-lesson interviews with the teachers and students. During the second workshop the participants talked more amongst themselves, asking questions and seeking confirmation from me, rather than the initial workshop where I was directing the flow of information.

## **Observations**

My observation of these lessons could be classed as simple and unstructured (Bryman, 2008). The observations were considered simple because I had little influence over

what I was observing. During the workshops the teachers and I discussed aspects of the lessons, and what I would be focusing my observations on. This may have had some impact. However, the structure of the lessons, the set-up of the class, teaching styles and class guidelines were not changed or implemented by me. So I observed as close to a normal class lesson as possible, taking into account my acknowledged presence. The unstructured nature of these observations meant I did not approach the lesson with a checklist of factors I wanted to record, but instead spent the time of the lesson recording the behaviours, language and discussions that occurred within the lesson. This method required me to take extensive field notes of both the large events of the classroom, and the smaller individual ones. These notes were to describe not just the way the teacher and students responded to the critical literacy questions, but also the classroom behaviours, the way the students interacted amongst themselves and the presentation of social and personal discourses and positionings (Neuman, 2006).

My role as an observer offered me a view of what could be considered naturally occurring events, tasks and interactions taking place within the classroom lesson (Adler & Adler, 1994). For some, performing these observations allows the researcher to stand outside of an influence and record events without manipulating or directing them. This would allow for the production of neutral and valid data (Adler & Adler, 1994; Angrosino, 2005). However, from the postmodern perspective, the researcher and his or her observations remain entangled. The observer and the observed make their choices with the knowledge of the other. The observed participants remained aware of my presence and purpose for being there. Likewise, while I attempted to record the lessons without judgement and bias, my choices and interpretations were always influenced by my personal involvement with the research and the behaviour of those I was observing (Adler & Adler, 1994; Angrosino, 2005). Therefore, instead of the impartial observer making a factual account of events, the observer will produce one of a possible of



multiple readings of events filtered through the historical and cultural discourses that construct them (Angrosino, 2005).

Observations of classroom lessons followed the workshops. As the other participating schools withdrew before the lessons could all take place, my observations all occurred within the same school. I was able to observe three classroom lessons. Each of the teachers who participated in the workshops, minus one of the co-teachers, all planned and conducted a lesson involving critical literacy approach to menstruation. The teachers were able to organise the classes on separate days which allowed me plenty of time to observe the lessons and conduct the interviews with a group of students and their teachers. Also with all the observed class lessons taking place within the same school there were common threads they all exhibited. For example, puberty education started at that school at Year Six, a year previous to what most schools told me, and all the classes had previous learning experiences with puberty as well as examining the construction of advertising. Therefore the lessons I observed all occurred within the same school community and may have lessened some potential variety in structure and implementation.

The classes had previously discussed my visit when they had reviewed the information sheets and consent forms for my research. On the day of my observations, each teacher introduced me to the class and explained the work I was doing. One teacher handed it over to me to introduce myself and the research. In one class a number of students' parents had requested their children not be recorded or observed during the lesson. The teacher arranged her class so these students sat in groups on the far side of the classroom. I focused my observations on the other groups and made no record of any activity or responses of the groups that included the declining students. The class

lessons all had a similar structure, starting with a teacher-led discussion about the role of advertising and what it might tell us about menstruation. Group work followed this introduction, with small groups of students working through a variety of questions. While each class followed a similar broad plan of discussing the messages of the texts and why they were present, the choice of advertisement texts and question, along with the structure of each class's lesson was different.

Two teachers started their lessons with a whole class discussion; the third teacher preferred having her students write down their responses. The teacher presented two advertisements and asked a series of questions related to the specific adverts. There was some discussion of marketing techniques such as font and image composition, drawing on previous knowledge and learning of advertising. The teachers then moved to direct the students to consider the messages of the advert, who they were directed to and what they were telling people. Students' responses varied between classes. From my observations one class seemed reluctant to engage in these discussions, however in my later interview with the teacher she expressed being pleased with the level of interaction. In one observed lesson, the teacher added a silent writing component to the activity where the students recorded their personal answers to the critical literacy questions. This made it harder to gauge the students' ideas and engagement. However, most seemed engaged with writing and the students called upon appeared to have thoughtful responses and later the class as a whole worked actively on the group tasks.

The second half of the lesson involved the students working in groups to discuss a number of critical literacy questions [see appendix D]. Two classes had groups moving through a number of work stations each having a specific question about a displayed advert. The other class had each group answered a series of questions about their own

advert. Each group was meant to discuss the question and come to an agreement about what to write. One teacher in her instructions stated “and you don’t have to write just one thing, because sometimes people get different ideas”. During this part of the lesson the students seemed open about discussion the aspects of the advertisements. Confusion about a question, or in one case, a need to have the advert explained created temporary obstacles to the discussion, rather than any obvious issue directly related to understanding about menstruation. Each group then reported back either their findings, or all the answers of the question they were left with.

### **Interviews: An overview**

Within qualitative research, the interview provides an integral and important source of data. The quality of the interview will impact on the quality of the research (Limerick, Burgess-Limerick, & Grace, 1996). The interview elicits spoken data as a way to investigate a particular research topic. This talk usually consists of forms of questions and answers. Sometimes the questions follow a very structured format with layout of the interview predetermined. Other interviews may take a less directive approach where the questions offer a guide to encourage the interviewee to continue or expand on what they were discussing (Roulston, 2010). My interviews generally fell within the later. I had prepared a question sheet that covered the areas I hoped to investigate [see appendix F]. These questions also served as prompts when the interview conversation became stagnate.

The questions the interviewer brings to the conversation are not neutral or value-free (Dyck, 1997; Limerick et al., 1996). The questions interviewers choose to ask, or not to ask, influence the types of responses and information received. The research’s

theoretical underpinnings form these questions (Dyck, 1997). As I read research into puberty and sexuality education and critical literacy, ideas of what I wanted to explore started forming and, in turn, created questions to pursue. The purpose of the interviews focuses more on exploring these previously identified ideas with a real world setting rather than uncovering some previously unknown fact (Roulston, 2010). The interviewer can be considered a “student of the interviewee” (Roulston, 2010, p. 17) seeking to learn as much as possible of the interviewee’s ideas and opinions through a series of sensitive questions. However, there needs to be an awareness that everyone participating, interviewer and interviewees, brings their own purpose to the conversation. The choice of questions and avenues explored reflect the interviewers positioning and in turn can construct the types of information gathered (Dyck, 1997).

Just as the choices of questions influence the representations and production of knowledge, the interpersonal dynamics within an interview may also impact on results (Dyck, 1997; Limerick et al., 1996). Who we are as people, both the interviewer and interviewee affects the ways we interact and view the other. The interviewer often positions him or herself, or is positioned by the interviewee as holding power (Dyck, 1997). This power position may be even more emphasised when the interviewer/interviewee pairing or group holds traditional binary divisions (Dyck, 1997; Limerick et al., 1996; Tang, 2002). For example, male/female or adult/child may imbue the interviewer with power and authority, both acknowledged and subconscious. Some may address these power concerns by having similar groups working together; so women interview women. Or children take the role of interviewer (Nairn, Munro, & Smith, 2005). While this may disrupt some of the dominant constructions of authority, as a poststructuralist, I see this contributing to the humanist essentialism that a one-true identity that all of a specific group share and connect to. So, for instance, that women all share one true identity regardless of age, ethnicity or cultural, economic, and/or

religious backgrounds (Nairn et al., 2005; Tang, 2002). Therefore, even in attempting to disrupt the traditional binaries, it remains important to be conscious of the influences the interviewer may possess. In being conscious of the ways power is positioned, we can recognise that power does not remain static. Just as with any social interaction, the power within the interview shifts and changes. An informative interview recognises and acknowledges the power all participants bring to the process (Limerick et al., 1996).

During the course of my research, the interviews could be separated into two different types; teachers were interviewed individually, and their students took part in group interviews. Each of these approaches has its own benefits and challenges.

### **Teacher individual interviews**

Interviews with the participants provided a large and important source of data. After each lesson, interviews allowed the corresponding teacher to give feedback on both the critical literacy approach and their general experiences and opinions of the puberty and sexuality education programme. Along with the conversations that took place during the workshops, each teacher participated in an individual interview which were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Most of these interviews took place immediately after the lesson, however, because of timing and other commitments, one teacher had to postpone her interview for a couple of weeks. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, taking place in a private location, the teacher's empty classroom, and my office at the university. These locations provided the teachers an opportunity to talk confidentially and with the exception of the one teacher, in a space they felt comfortable and familiar with. For the one teacher who came to my office, I allowed her to schedule the time that suited her the best, and gave her a number of options of locations, to help her feel comfortable and ensure she felt secure about the confidentiality of the interview.

Having worked with the teachers through the workshops, being present in their school that week, and sitting in on their lesson, a level of rapport and partnership had been started (Limerick et al., 1996; Roulston, 2010). These teachers were the ones required to implement the ideas of my research and for whom teaching puberty and sexuality education is part of their professional careers. As such, I approached the interviews with the hope to “engage in a dialogue through questions and responses that encourage the researcher and co-inquirer to reflect together on the concepts that are emerging and taking shape within the interview itself” (Dinkins, 2005, cited in Roulston, 2010, p. 18). While I had prepared a question guide [see appendix F], I looked upon these interviews as a shared discussion (Limerick et al., 1996), with the guide offering cues and helping to maintain the momentum. These interviews could be seen as the accumulation of the journey we took together, and as a result I was less interested in answers to a series of questions and more focused on creating a discussion to explore the concepts that emerged through that journey. In doing so, I positioned myself as a participant in the discussion, offering my opinions and experiences rather than a natural detached observer seeking to discover their knowledge.

#### Focus groups interviews

The interviews with the students involved small groups of roughly six students equally balanced with girls and boys. The first of the two interviews took place before the lesson and focused on the views of learning about puberty, especially menstruation. The second, post-lesson interview sought their opinions of the critical literacy lesson and how it impacted their beliefs about menstruation. Focus group interviews, by design, focus their attention on one particular theme or issue (Flores & Alonso, 1995; Lederman, 1990). The focus group interviews with the students gave them an opportunity to express

their opinions of learning about menstruation, and in a greater sense, puberty, as well as give their thoughts of the critical literacy lesson they had just experienced. In the case of the preservice teachers' focus group, the discussions centred on the experiences of the workshops, what proved useful and what needed more information or refinement. As the focus group interview occurred after the May school placement, it also allowed for discussions about implementing aspects of critical literacy into their teaching practice. The group component of the focus group interviews provides not just an answer to the presented question, but also the ability to interact with others, offer comments and/or questions about the various ideas and experiences reported by others (Lederman, 1990).

Generally focus groups consist of a variety of represented demographics. By selecting a sample from different social and cultural groups, focus group interviews aim to provide an opportunity of representation for all groups involved and related to the topic of interest. This representation does not result in reproduction or generalisation across population, rather it allows for individual and diverse voices to be heard (Flores & Alonso, 1995). However, the teachers choose the participants out of the students that agreed to participate, however, it was stated that I would like a good mixture of genders, therefore all the groups considered of roughly half girls and half boys. The school's location also contributed to the make-up of the group, with there being a predominantly middle class white population base. One teacher commented "[school] really was sheltered away from any diversity" (Tina, Individual Interview).

## **Discourse analysis**

The data collected for this research came from a variety of sources [see figure 1]. Transcripts were made from the recordings of the workshops and interviews. During the class lessons, the initial teacher's instructions were recorded, and extensive field notes were created and classroom activity material collected. All this information provided the sources for analysis.

Aligned with the overarching theoretical framework of this research, I also approached the analysis of the collected data from a feminist poststructuralist stance (e.g. Baxter, 2002b; Kenway et al., 1994; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, my analysis focused on the discourses around menstruation that were made available and the ones that were missing. I examined how the participants engaged with, or set aside, these discourses as they constructed meanings and understanding for themselves within the critical literacy approach to menstruation (Baxter, 2002b; Kenway et al., 1994). In looking at how the critical literacy lessons were constructed and received, I was able to examine how critical literacy can impact on our constructions of menstruation and the variety of discourses the approach makes available. I also show how critical literacy impacts the positioning in the classrooms and how the approach may allow for a wider constitution of meanings and subjectivities. The investigation also shows how the dominant discourses of puberty and sexuality education are challenged and explored through engaging with a critical literacy approach.

This analysis of the discourses allows us to see the complexities and variations that make up our understandings of the world. I do not seek to show a definitive truth. Indeed “[r]eaders are more likely to find ‘openings’ (Stronach and MacLure, 1997), ‘ruins’ (St Pierre and Pillow, 2000), partial small-‘t’ truths, and possibilities for ways of working that



refuse prescription and definitive conclusions” (Roulston, 2010, p. 169). From my poststructuralist viewpoint there is no truth waiting patiently for me to discover it, and present it to the world (Baxter, 2002b). Instead what the identification and examination of the multiple discourses, both present and missing, show us are the ambiguities and contradictions that make up our worlds (Baxter, 2002b; Peräkylä, 2005). And in turn I am able to show the individual tensions and contradictions within our experiences, and see a depth of meaning and how we position and are positioned amongst them.

Discourse analysis also attempts to make all voices visible (Baxter, 2002b). While dominant discourses often work to silence or negate alternative discourses, making them unrecognised or unpalatable, discourse analysis seeks to expose the variety of positions, and the variety of ways individuals take up different positionings at different times (Baxter, 2002b; Davies, 2000). Discourse analysis seeks to show how and why people may take up or reject certain discursive positionings as well as making visible the ways people adopt various positions in their interactions with their social and cultural contexts they inhabit (Baxter, 2002b; Davies, 2000). Discourse analysis shows people as “unfixed, unsatisfied ... not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change” (Baxter, 2002b, p. 829) Therefore, through this process of discourse analysis we can see how the participants are constantly negotiating their way within the variety of discourses, while some are made visible and others hidden, rejecting some while attempting to take up others. This allows us to explore the ways a critical literacy approach to teaching menstruation may impact what discourses are seen as viable, and the effect investigating and challenging dominant discourses have on our constructed understandings.

However, poststructuralist discourse analysis does not provide a set of directions for this analysis (Roulston, 2010). Instead of a set of directives, it encourages the researcher to read and reread the texts under analysis, to acknowledge the variety of multiple discursively constructed meanings without assigning the weight of truth to any (Peräkylä, 2005). Discourse analysis wants to look beyond the surface layer to the assumptions that underlie what is given value and the 'belief of truth'. In this way I see discourse analysis as similar to critical literacy in which no one reading is more correct than another. Indeed, discourse analysis does not offer a resolution, but may open up more questions and uncertainties, therefore offering more space for an alternative and challenging discourses to be recognised (Baxter, 2002a, 2002b). This is not to say nothing can be reported or presented as significant with the field of research. However, discourse analysis gives us a "multi-hued, multi-voiced, clamorous circus" which challenges conventional methods of research by creating multiple and varied results that may appear to be in conflict (Roulston, 2010, p. 168).

Due to the small number of participants I did not use any specific resource to code my analysis. I started the analysis by reading through the field notes and transcripts of the workshops and interviews. As the workshops and lessons were conducted over months, this initial reading refreshed my memory and gave me a broad overview of the material I was working with. During the observations of the lessons, I had made a key field note entry on how prevalent the exploration of shame and secrecy within the advertisements was within every lesson. Using this note as a starting point, I created a file document noting all the ways the participants engaged with this discourse. Recording quotes, I also added notes about the ways the shame and secrecy discourse were taken up and challenged, ways they were being (re)produce and moments of resistance. During this process I also started to notice and record other themes within the transcript, making separate documents. Each document recorded the same information, direct quotes

from the transcripts and field notes, connecting it to a particular theme, with questions about their ways discourses were being engaged with, and how each impacted the research question of “how does a critical literacy approach affect the teaching and learning of menstruation”. With these documents, I presented the data to my supervisors. In making an argument for each one, I was able to narrow my focus. Two themes were set aside as they did not directly relate to the research question, while another one was deemed lacking in evidence. All the documents were kept with the possibility of reporting them at a later date. The questions asked by my supervisors and my subsequent responses were recorded with each documents data, building a detailed analysis.

## **Ethics**

Before engaging with data collection, I submitted my ethics application to the University of Otago Ethics Committee (ref: 13/188). The application required me to take the abstract and theoretical ideas of my research and present them in a concise concrete manner to a group outside of the focus of my topic. While this is not the primary purpose of the ethics procedure, the process of writing the application augmented by discussions with my supervisors enabled me to refine my research into practical and achievable goals. This process also helped ensure that the later amendments introducing new ideas and areas of research meshed with the established concepts.

The main purpose of seeking ethics approval is to ensure the research does no harm to researcher or participants (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). In creating a research proposal associated with a topic that is often constructed as difficult and potentially problematic, I had to show that I was sensitive to the concerns and dangers my participants might

face. This need to be aware of potential harm is not limited to topics that might be deemed sensitive, rather it is a concept that all researchers should be aware of (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). While it is impossible to see all potential outcomes, and sensitive topics should not just be avoided or left unaddressed, research should make an effort not to harm those we seek to understand and examine. For instance, participants were given clear information on what topics were going to be addressed, and allowing them to have control over the location of the interviews. Therefore it could provide participants with safety and comfort to engage in 'difficult' topics.

Gaining informed consent from all those included in the research can work towards ensuring that the process remains sensitive and safe for the participants (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Information sheets, outlining the purpose and structure of the research, are provided to all potential participants [see appendix A]. Contact details were included on all the forms, however, I was never contacted to clarify or provide further information, nor were my supervisors. In the case of the students, each teacher explained my presence in the class and went over the outline of my research project. Therefore, it would not be unwarranted to assume that participants all had a firm and clear understanding of what they had consented to participate in. However, on a couple of occasions during the interview process students spoke of their confusions of what they and I were doing. This indicates that informed consent is actually an ongoing process (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Whilst we make participants right to withdraw at any time explicit, there may also be a need to engage in ongoing dialogue about the purpose and understanding of the research. Research into working with children always stresses the importance of consent and regularly returning to check the participants ongoing consent (Mahon, Glendinning, Clarke, & Craig, 1996; Morrow & Richards, 1996). This consent is frequently based off "a 'one-off' event at the outset, on the basis of the presentation of adequate information that provides sufficiently for the participants to

'know' and 'understand' what they are getting themselves into" (David, Edwards, & Alldred, 2001, p. 348). But in considering *informed* consent the notion of information being transmitted sufficiently as a one-off may need to be reconsidered and not, just in relation to maintaining consent about also returning to detailing and discussing the ideas and purposes of the research. 'Informed' may also be an ongoing process (Conroy & Harcourt, 2009; David et al., 2001).

The idea of informed consent, pre and during the research process allows for voluntary participation (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). With the information to make the decision people have the power to choose to participate or not. However, like many of the ethical considerations in research, the ideal of voluntary participation can become blurred. A large part of my in the field data collection involved observing and interviewing children aged between 10 and 12 years. This meant that often their participation was decided or guided by adult gatekeepers. This supports the belief that parents and caregivers have a right and a responsibility of care. Therefore it becomes the parent or caregiver who considers the information before deciding on whether to consent. In this way it is often the parent who consents to allowing their child to participate and the child who then assents, or agrees to actually take part (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Considering this, parental gatekeepers have the potential to prevent children engaging and participating in research that may interest them. However, some might argue in a situation such as in-school research about lesson material and learning, children may actually possess the necessary awareness and understanding to make the decision (Mahon et al., 1996; Morrow & Richards, 1996). The teaching of menstruation sits within the regular school curriculum. While I accept and support guardian and parental gatekeepers having input into their children's participation, it could also be argued that by framing the research as 'sensitive', we are contributing to the discourse menstruation is shameful and not worthy of exploration in classrooms.

Finally, confidentiality is important in the reporting of the research. This means the researcher will be able to identify the participants, but this information will not be recognisable to the public (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). Within this project, the majority of the participants choose a pseudonym to be used to identify them throughout the thesis. The exception being the one participant who did not want to choose his/her own, and I supplied one. I also do not identify the schools that choose to take part. During the workshops and interviews I ensured as much privacy as possible by conducting them in private rooms. The need for privacy may make confidentiality difficult to navigate, especially when working with children (Mahon et al., 1996; Valentine, 1999). Children are not always awarded the same privacy that adults are accustomed to (Valentine, 1999). For this research, student group interviews took place in the staff room, with clear “do not disturb” instructions, ensuring participants were not interrupted or overheard.

## **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity calls upon the researcher to actively acknowledge how their own subjectivity affects what they see, interpret and report (Jones, 1992; Pillow, 2003). The researcher is not an impartial observer, recording the ‘true reality’. Instead, the choices that are made, what is recorded, and how it is understood, are products of his or her own subjectivity. As Jones (1992) states “all of us *inscribe* rather than just *describe* reality” (p. 25). As a researcher, I do not sit outside of the dominant discourses that construct menstruation in ways that are understood as valid. Therefore, as a reflexive researcher, I work to understand my own influences and how they may impact the research design and findings. Reflexivity should not become an indulgent confessional (Pillow, 2003; St. Pierre, 2000) Rather reflexivity creates an ongoing self-reflection of questioning and

challenge the process of research, making visible the ways knowledge is constructed (Pillow, 2003).

In creating research that explores the construction of knowledge, it is important to remain aware of how dominant discourses work to maintain a particular understanding. Ethics approval requires researchers to be sensitive and aware of potential harm when designing and implementing research. However, in planning my research, I endeavoured to be aware of (re)producing many of the dominant discourses around menstruation and therefore risk my research perpetuating the issues I hope to challenge. For example, the ethics committee queried my use of 'menstruation' in the information and consent forms to be distributed to the students. They expressed a concern that the term menstruation may be too adult and therefore foreign to the students. While it could have been possible to edit the material, I believed in the importance of using the correct terminology in an open way so as to challenge the construction of menstruation as something secret and socially unspoken. The argument that menstruation should not be treated as a hidden word, along with the corroboration from a College of Education health lecturer that the language was used in schools was accepted by the Ethics Committee, and 'menstruation' remained in the material. This example illustrates that while working on approaches that promote the disruption of the dominant and limiting discursive constructions of menstruation, I also had to remain cognisant to the ways those discourses also recreated within my own constitution.

From the start of this research project I took an actively reflexive approach to the work. As I outlined previously in the thesis introduction, the construction of menstruation in our society often presents only a limited view of what it means to be a woman. In investigating the use of critical literacy to expand this construction of menstruation, I can

never fully escape the way I am constituted within the same construction. My history, my age and gender, my socio-economic status, my cultural and religious positioning all contribute to what discourses I take up or set aside about gender, menstruation and the academic process (Pillow, 2003). By maintaining a reflexive position with my research I aim to make a conscious effort to challenge and disrupt my own framing. This requires more than an endless questioning of one's own positionings, which risks becoming a narcissistic form of navel-gazing (Pillow, 2003). Instead, reflexive practice exposes how who we are results in what knowledge we produce (Pillow, 2003; Reay, 1996). In studying the constructions within puberty education I made a choice to focus on menstruation. The reasoning behind my choice was partly connected to the amount of media and texts available about menstruation, therefore aiding in the implementation of a critical literacy investigation. However, my understandings about gender and puberty constructed through my own positioning impacted on the aspects I decided to focus on. Indeed, not until one of the male students, Doug, pointed out that "girls have it easy, they get to hide it" (Tina's class, post- lesson interview), did I consider the potential of forced visibility being as detrimental as forced invisibility. The construction of maleness and masculinity in puberty education also potentially limits how young men are constituted. However, because of my gender and personal positioning, these constructions were not instantly visible to me. As Reay (1996) points out, reflexivity helps to show the processes and positioning that influence the knowledge produced, but only if we are aware of those influences. Like the example above shows, maybe discursive constructions remain hidden even as we are caught up in them.

We are all discursively constructed and positioned in multiple ways (Barrett, 2005; Davies & Gannon, 2005). These ways of being and making sense of the world cannot simply be set aside (Barrett, 2005; Davies, 2000). Therefore, the knowledge produced is never devoid of bias. Being reflexive does not automatically remove bias from the



produced knowledge. Instead it shows the ways researchers construct knowledge and the various social, cultural and political power relations that influence the production of knowledge (Pillow, 2003). Using the allegory of the post-modern architectural feature of exposing pipes and beams, Jones(1992) points to reflexive post-modern research as exposing the assumptions and influences that contributed to its construction. The exposing of who I am as part of the research requires more than the ticking of demographic boxes. We, as researchers, must make visible and explicitly the ways who we are worked in constructing this particular knowledge. Visibility of the researchers' positions does not make the research more 'true', however, in creating research where bias and viewpoint are explicit, it allows the reader to recognise and potentially challenge the social, cultural and political influences in the representations (Pillow, 2003; Reay, 1996). But as Patai (1994) posits we "do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly" (p. 70). Therefore, I believe in the importance of creating and maintaining a balance between the visible articulation of self-reflection and the avoidance of creating narcissistic confessions rather than complex and detailed representations.

## **Conclusion**

The research, looking at using critical literacy to teach and learn about menstruation within puberty and sexuality education, was performed within a feminist methodology using qualitative methods. Two workshops were attended by the participating teachers, the first to introduce a critical literacy approach to teaching menstruation and the second to collaboratively plan a classroom critical literacy menstruation lesson. Field notes and activity sheets were collected from the observed lessons. Also a variety of interviews were conducted. The teachers all participated in exit interviews to discuss the workshops and classroom lessons. And a small group of three girls and three boys from each class

attended two group interviews. The first pre-lesson group interview discussed their general thoughts and experiences with menstruation education and the second post-lesson interview sought their opinions of the critical literacy lesson. Field notes of observed workshops and classroom lessons, transcripts of both the workshops and the interviews with teachers and students, as well as collected classroom material were analysed to examine the discourses that constructed knowledge of menstruation, opinions of the critical literacy lessons, and how this approach impacted the ways the teachers and students navigated the construction of menstruation. All research undertaken within the University of Otago requires ethics approval to ensure the informed consent, confidentiality and well-being of all participants. However, due to this research involving the topic of menstruation within the puberty and sexuality education programme, ethics consideration had the added focus of dealing with a 'sensitive topic'. As a reflexive researcher, I had to take notice of the ways dominant discourses, especially around the shame and secrecy construction of menstruation might have influenced how I performed the data collection and analysis.

The following chapters examine three prominent ideas that resulted from this research. In Chapter Five, I look at power; how it operates both within constructions of menstruation and within the observed classroom lessons. This includes new expressions of power as well as resistance to these changes. Chapter Six examines the discourses of shame and secrecy that remain dominant in the construction of menstruation. I examine how prominent these discourses remain and the ways that challenges to this dominant construction are occurring. Finally, I look at the concept of dialogue within the critical literacy approach, examining the ways it can enhance learning and open up new possible discourses and potential subjectivities in Chapter Seven.

## Chapter Five: Using Power to Position the Experience of Menstruation

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### Introduction

Working from a theoretical framework of feminist poststructuralism, and critical theory version of critical literacy, the analysis of the findings comes from a position that sees all knowledge as a construction. Although some knowledge will become dominant, framed as 'truth', there are multiple meanings, all of which hold the potential to be taken up as we construct our understandings of the world. From this theoretical framework, the literature review explored research in menstruation and in critical literacy. Due to a lack of literature addressing the teaching of menstruation, this literature review expanded to report constructions of menstruation and the teaching of puberty and sexuality in general. With a solid foundation of theory and the literature from previous research, I constructed the research design of this thesis. The research involved participant teachers attending critical literacy workshops that informed menstruation lessons I was able to observe. The teachers running these lessons and a small group of participating students were interviewed. The theory and literature foundation, and the data collected during the phases of the study, formed the data I report on in the following three findings chapters.

This chapter investigates the power relations existing in the topic of menstruation, and how the critical literacy lesson can promote act of resistance and challenges to the dominant power constructions. The Foucauldian theory of power relations underpinning this chapter challenge the humanist notion of power (Foucault, 1978; St. Pierre, 2000). Power in this way, exists in relations, rather than being something an individual possesses, power exists within human relationships. With power existing in human relationships, power relations are everywhere. Therefore freedom is also everywhere,

for power relations only exist if the subject is free. Power is not a permanent possession of an individual or institution, but can be seen as a dynamic mobile situation. While not fixed and absolute, some power relations can become rooted in a way that extremely limits freedom and the possibility of resistance (Foucault, 1978). There can be no power relations without resistance. Power and resistance work together in a way that creates our reality, so power is not inherently negative. “In fact power produces; it produces reality” (Foucault, 1979, p. 194). With our reality created within and through power relations, resistance engages us to consider and change how we are constituted and how we constitute ourselves (St. Pierre, 2000).

As an overview, this chapter explores how these ideas of power and resistance work within the construction of menstruation, especially in relation to the observed critical literacy lessons. I start *Power operating within menstruation lessons*. This will provide an overview on how the power of dominant discourses is used to (re)produce our understanding and effect the way we constitute menstruation and the menstruating woman, both within the education fields and within wider society. Although dominant discourses of menstruation still construct our views of menstruation, the next section, *The positioning of special knowledge as powerful*, I also report on how some girls construct their understandings and experience of menstruation as special knowledge. This special knowledge enabled them to position themselves as powerful within the classroom lessons and interviews. The workshops, and the classroom lessons contained a critical literacy approach to examining and challenging dominant discourses of menstruation. However, as these challenges occur, resistances to the shifts in power and disruptions to dominant discourses took place. In the final part of this chapter, *Acts of resistance to challenge or reinforce dominant power relations* I report on the ways

resistances took place, both against the dominant discursive constructions of menstruation, and in response to the challenges to these constructions.

### **Power operating within menstruation lessons**

Within education, discussion and exploration of gender, sexuality, and the body reflect the dominant discourse of Western culture and society (Allen, 2001; 2007a; Diorio & Munro, 2000). Our classroom practices and education systems do not sit outside of these discourses. Nor do the students come to puberty and sexuality education exist outside of the constructions and understandings created by these discourses. While technical information about the changes occurring at puberty may be missing, students already begin to embrace and incorporate many of the dominant discourses about feminine and masculine sexuality and the gendered body. When asking students about their knowledge of menstruation all the children within this study already possessed some prior knowledge before being introduced to the topic in the classroom. The children interviewed from Lucy's class indicated they had already started puberty education the year before.

Researcher: So this wasn't the first year you've done puberty?

Donny: No we did it last year, in year six.

Kathy: And you learn it from your Mum and my sister told me stuff and it's all on TV and stuff.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-Lesson)

This constructed knowledge comes from a variety of sources. Like Kathy above, young people's mothers and friends still appear to be the primary sources of information, however, increasingly forms of media are impacting on their construction of appropriate sexual and adult selves (Allen, et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006; Kissling, 1996a).

In being exposed to, and by taking up, the dominant discourses young people conform to, and (re)create the dominant constructions of menstruation. Girls find their identities often governed by the expectations of management of their bodies. Expectations of acceptable femininity that often includes the dismissal and hiding of any indication of menstruation, are taken up and reinforced (Chrisler, Marván, Gorman, & Rossini, 2015; Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). Girls often face a dichotomous message that constitutes menstruation as a natural and important milestone in their development alongside the idea that it should be minimised and seen as trivial (Jackson & Falmagne, 2013; Lee, 2009). During a discussion of classroom management, one of the teachers, Lisa, also believed it was important that the girls not make a big deal about menstruating.

Lisa: And girls also need to know it's not a big deal, to not use it as an excuse, you know. We all have to deal with it, so they need to get on with things instead of being all "Oh I've got my period"

(Teacher Interview)

Lisa's comment that "we all have to deal with it, so they need to get on with things" presents menstruation as something that needs to be aside, managed in some way to make it unobtrusive and unimportant in a woman's life. This was replicated during discussions about talking openly about menstruation.

Carrie: It's kinda important but I wish we didn't have to talk about it.

Tracy: The suggestion box [the teacher] uses is good because then we don't have to say things in class

(Tina's Class, Pre-lesson)

Young people learn menstruation presents a passage of status from girl to woman, but they must keep this to themselves and present a 'normal' state (Newton, 2012). As

Newton points out, while we teach menstruation as a natural and normal stage of development we are concurrently presenting messages that the only way to be normal is to hide all signs and indications menstruation is occurring. Indeed one source of puberty information presents menstruation that occurs for the 'average healthy girl' and at the same time declaring "she must not think of her period as unusual or special and when in public she must behave the same way she does when she is not menstruating" (Charlesworth, 2001, p. 14).

Girls often take up these discourses that encourage silence and/or dismissal of menstruation, however, boys face even stronger discourses that constitute menstruation as none of their concern (Allen, et al., 2011). The experiences of girls and women are devalued in dominant cultural discourses (Fingerson, 2006). Boys take up these discourses of menstruation, as a female issue, having little to no value and (re)create the belief that understanding menstruation is not something they need to concern themselves with (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). This could be seen during the group interviews where boys spoke about their indifference to learning about menstruation.

Quinten: I don't really see the point.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson)

Jay: It's girls' stuff, we have to know, but it's, like, girls' stuff.

(Tina's Class, Pre-lesson)

The discourse that menstruation is not important to males is one many boys reported. Boys spoken with during this study believed there was no point having to learn about a female experience. Knowledge and understanding about the female body for its own sake appears to hold little value to boys (Allen et al., 2011). The male experience of

puberty is often presented as powerful and exciting, full of activity and agency. However, students learn girls face discomfort and a need of bodily surveillance. Only when tied to reproduction does menstruation start to have importance. I would argue alongside Diorio and Munro (2000) and Lee (1994), that the teaching of menstruation promotes a heteronormative discourse that often constitutes the female body in relation to male need and desire. As Lee (1994) posits:

[W]omen are taught to live and discipline their bodies in accordance with prescriptions of heterosexuality, experiencing themselves as sexual objects for heterosexual male viewing pleasure, and also as mothers of men's children. (p. 344)

This construction of women in relation to the needs of men is often visible in the discussions around puberty. Teachers present menstruation as being important “even for the boys, I tell them, you may want kids one day” (Lucy, Teacher Interview). Students, both boys and girls, query why boys need to learn about menstruation with comments like “it’s girls stuff” and “it’d be better if the boys weren’t [in class]”. However when questioned about why boys are learning about menstruation, the importance is almost always stated in relation to the impact on the boy’s life, for example:

Donny:                If you have like a wife and stuff, you need to know, because she’ll have it and you’ll want a kid.

(Lucy’s Class, Pre-Lesson)

While relating events to one’s own life can be a useful tactic, it can also contribute to the belief that if it is not about the male experience it is not important. Teaching of menstruation becomes relevant when presented as an issue that will have direct impact on the lives of men. Donny’s comment above about why he sees it important to learn is often mirrored by teachers and other educators when they discuss the importance of boys learning about menstruation.



Pennsy: Even in our school, with it being Catholic, I do tell my parents, yes it's important for the boys to be in this class, because you know, one day they will be married and have wives and children to deal with.

(Teachers' Workshop 3)

Tina: So why do we need to learn about menstruation?

Female student: Because it's part of how girls have babies.

Tina: Right, and even you boys need to know about that.

(Tina's Class, Field observation notes)

In drawing attention to how menstruation may positively impact boys' lives, "it's important we all learn about it" may open room for alternative discourses, and provide potential resistance to dominant discourses that devalues menstruation but it might also be read as removing menstruation from being a female experience (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). For example, when Fingerson (2006) asked one of her female participants "what is the point of menstruation?"... She said that menstruation is 'something to make guys miserable ... 'cause they have to put up with the whole PMS and all that'" (p. 119). In attempts to value learning about menstruation for boys and girls we may dismiss and devalue the women's experience of menstruation, thereby contributing to discourses that create and maintain a binary that values and privileges male experiences while devaluing the female (Davies, 2000; Kenway et al., 1994; Kissling, 2002).

The construction of menstruation as a negative experience and relegated to insignificant 'girls' stuff' still impacts our teaching and understandings of puberty and gendered identity. However, recent research shows indications that contradictory and challenging

discourses around menstruation are being taken up by young people. During one of the group interviews, when one of the boys voiced the discourse of menstruation not having any value, and he could not see any point in learning about the topic, one girl was able to challenge this discourse by valuing female experience rather than trying to relate it to the male experience.

Quinten: I don't see the point.

Isadora: But it's stuff that's important to girls, so that's the point.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-Lesson)

For some girls menstruation indicates membership to the larger group of women, offering an exclusive comradeship that only women who menstruate can share. During the research interviews for my Master's thesis girls spoke of how becoming a menstruating woman would allow access to the adult secrets other non-menstruating girls would not know (Agnew, 2012). This special knowledge can provide a position of power over those that do not have the same experiences and information, including boys. For William, not knowing enough about menstruation was deemed a threat to his construction of himself as more knowledgeable than other people. When discussing how the students learned about menstruation originally and from who, he said:

William: I heard it from TV, like oh you're getting period and I was like, what does that mean, and they said it was girls stuff, so I went to the classroom and into class, and I figured it all out, so now when I watch TV, I'm like I know everything. I still know more than girls do.

(Lisa's Class, Pre-Lesson)

Boys do not personally share in this special knowledge, and like William, may feel excluded and at a disadvantage (Fingerson, 2006). Fingerson (2006) points out that within the dominant cultural construction of masculinity admitting to a lack of knowledge

is seen as a failure. So boys are often caught in a contradictory dichotomy where information about menstruation is devalued and denigrated alongside a need to appear knowledgeable experts who “know everything” (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). This may lead to boys discovering they do not know as much about menstruation as girls and therefore feeling their assumed position of gendered authority threatened (Fingerson, 2006). For William, it could be said that he saw the discourses of silence that regulate how and what boys should learn about, disadvantaging him. His desire to know the information about menstruation does not necessarily show a value to that information, but rather a correction to a potential threat of the construction of masculine knowledge holder (Fingerson, 2006).

### **The positioning of special knowledge as powerful**

Girls continue to remain ‘othered’ through negative constructions of menstruation, however, some girls have found their knowledge of menstruation offers them power over boys (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). Girls may see menarche as signalling the status of moving into adulthood that may provide her with the privileges and power that comes from the visible milestone (Newton, 2012). This first-hand knowledge of menstruation makes girls privy to special knowledge and membership of an exclusive group (Fingerson, 2006; Newton, 2012). However, discourses that promotes silence and secrecy around menstruation often leave boys without a good understanding of menstruation. Parents often appear reluctant to discuss menstruation with their sons, and will counsel their daughters to keep their own menstruation hidden (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006; Kissling, 1996a). Therefore, while menstruation education in schools is taught in co-educational classes, girls will often receive more information about menstruation and the pubertal changes in the female body than their male counterparts (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). The lack of information was seen by

William's comment above, as putting him at a disadvantage to girls, and something that needed rectified, "to be figured all out".

While the construction of menstruation as a negative experience and relegated to insignificant 'girls' stuff' still impact the teaching and understandings of puberty and gendered identity, recent research shows indications that contradictory and challenging discourses around menstruation are being taken up by young people (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). This research shows that girls often use the experience of menstruation to position themselves in powerful and exclusive ways. After menarche, girls may position themselves as holding special knowledge that their non-menstruating peers do not know, and boys will always be excluded from (Fingerson, 2006). Isadora claiming learning about menstruation was important because "it's stuff that's important to girls" positions the girls' experience of menstruation as powerful. It positions the experience and knowledge as something exclusive to girls. As stated earlier, William felt a need to rectify being excluded from this knowledge because it was "girls' stuff". This special knowledge may offer a position of power and indeed, Allen et al. (2011) and Fingerson (2006) reported girls using their knowledge of menstruation to manipulate and embarrass boys. So, while not a reversal or dismantling of power, we can see that the power relations are always open to resistance and challenge, and the resistance to dominant constructions of power is an ongoing practice (Foucault, 1978; St. Pierre, 2000).

During the classroom observations of the critical literacy lesson looking at menstrual product advertising, parents of roughly half the students of one of the classroom's participating in the project, asked for their children to be excluded from being observed. This resulted in the teacher organising the class into specific groups allowing me to focus

on the two groups that supplied their consent. These groups also contained students who participated in the interviews. Therefore I observed the progression from before the lesson to after it, which in turn created the storyline I will discuss next. The observation and interviews of this one event depicts the ways girls' knowledge of menstruation can be constructed and engaged with as powerful.

Lucy, the class teacher, organised the students into five smaller groups. Three of these groups were mixed genders, one group was all boys, and the other group, all girls. Of these groups my observations remained solely on one mixed gender group consisting of three boys and two girls, and one group of six girls. Each group was given a picture of a magazine advertisement for a brand of menstrual products, and asked to discuss a series of three questions about the advert. These questions had been previously outlined by the teacher. She asked one member of each group to record the discussion on paper provided, reiterating that she was not looking for a 'right' answer, but rather a record of what each group thought and had discussed.

The mixed gender group of three boys and two girls received the magazine version of a Libra advertisement colloquially known as the 'Wonderman'. The television version of this advert appears to be highly popular and comes up in all of the discussions I have had with both teacher and student participants during this study.

The magazine version of this ad found in the Run-ning Amok blog (Run-ning Amok, 2013) shows three young men, each of the men who shown in three separate poses that could be considered 'superhero stances'. The young man in a blue t-shirt had three menstrual pads stuck to his chest as if to imply armour, in two of his pictures he has the

pads against the sides of his face, reminiscent of wings on a helmet. Likewise, the man in grey positioned pads on each side of his head, and had four stuck to his chest like a suit of armour. The third man used them as shields for his wrists and shoulders, and had a number of them wrapped around his head as a crown. All these men seem to be playfully acting and amused by their own behaviours. Although initially my attention was focused on the other group, I was drawn back to this group when I overheard one of the girls comment “boys don’t get periods, so you don’t know”. I missed what had been said prior to this statement, however the girl’s comment presented issues of knowledge and whose ideas were of value. Seeing this as an interesting and potentially informative interplay, I choose to pay particular attention to the group’s discussion and took detailed field notes.

The three boys and one of the girls had taken part in the pre-lesson interview. During this interview, I asked the students if they were interested in learning about menstruation. The consensus appeared to be no. When I followed up with whether it was “important that kids your age learn about it”, one girl responded with “they’re growing up, they need to know what they can face.” However, when I directed the same question to the boys the responses of “no” or physical shrugs indicated, at best, ambivalence towards the topic, and at worst complete disinterest. This apparent lack of interest was also found in the comments of boys from the other interviews.

Doug:                    It’s a girl’s thing. It’s sorta kinda weird, embarrassing.

(Lisa’s Class, Pre-Lesson)

William:                It’s not really a guy’s business. It’s girl’s business.

(Lisa’s Class, Pre-Lesson)

Peter: If you have a wife and stuff you need to know. So that's why we have to have the class.

(Tina's Class, Pre-Lesson)

These responses conform to other research that indicates boys will often dismiss the importance of learning about menstruation (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). As they position menstruation as “girls’ business” they are devaluing the information. Fingerson (2006) argues the social etiquette of hiding menstruation originates from men. This argument states that if something, in this case menstruation, has no value nor enhancement in men’s lives it should be concealed or hidden. As long as it was ‘not their problem’ many boys felt there was little need to learn about it. For some boys, their desire to not learn about menstruation was a way to maintain the unimportance of menstruation, and potential of women’s lives in general. As long as they did not have to think or learn about menstruation they could avoid any negative impact on their lives (Allen et al., 2011) In taking up a discourse that menstruation has little or no importance, these boys recreated an understanding that menstruation should remain silent and irrelevant (Diorio & Munro, 2003; Newton, 2012). When inviting participants to take part in my research, I also encountered these ideas of irrelevance, as one school gatekeeper replied “why on earth are you wanting to discuss that?” (field notes during recruitment phase). Therefore these ideas about importance of menstruation are not confined to adolescent boys. The fact young people, just entering puberty, have already taken it up shows the dominance and common-sense belief of this discourse.

During the observed lesson, the teacher set a series of questions for each group to answer in relation to the advertisement they were using. As the group I was observing began to discuss these questions, the girls in the group became assertive in their knowledge. They took physical control over the materials, the advertisement and the

writing of the responses. They also took control of the conversation using the fact they do, or will, menstruate to position themselves as knowledgeable. From this position of holder of special knowledge (Fingerson, 2006), the girls challenged the boys' position of academic superiority. Boys become highly invested in the idea of their academic superiority over girls (Fingerson, 2006; Renold, 2001). This could have contributed to the boys in the observed group reacting with annoyance and some confusion when their opinions were not prioritised. During the activity sheet portion of the lesson, the girls would often pay more attention to each other's comments, side-lining or dismissing the boy's contributions. The girl who took the role of recording the groups comments would write down the comments of the other girl, but often question those supplied by the boy, contradicting them and supplying different information. This appeared to be a new experience for the boys, and they made a number of attempts to take control of the discussion:

Clarence:        You're not listening to me.

Quinten:        You need to write down my answers. Why aren't you writing them down?

(Lucy's Class Lesson Observation)

As my research was limited to the observation of this one lesson, I am unable to judge if this reaction was limited to puberty and sexuality education. However, in terms of this lesson and the instruction of "report a summary of the discussion", the boys appeared to believe their opinions should take precedence and were not happy with the girls speaking with authority.

The lesson's application of a critical literacy approach, with a focus on dialogue and the potential of multiple meaning not only disrupted male hegemonic power within the



puberty and sexuality education lessons, it also opened up space for girls to speak with power and authority. Girls often report a reluctance to openly discuss menstruation, seeing it as risking teasing and exposure. Minimalising the risk of exposure was what Tracy liked her teacher using a question box, where students could place anonymous questions that the teacher might later discuss. “The question box is good, cos no one knows whose question it is” (Tracy, Tina’s class, pre-lesson). Likewise, Rebekah also felt asking questions would exposure her to her peers “You don’t want to talk about it, because they’ll think you’re talking about yourself” (Rebekah, Tina’s class, pre-lesson). Girls often learn to be silent and distant from their own bodies. They learn from their peers and society that their bodies will often become objects of ridicule and attention, in the form of sexualised male gaze or enforcement of bodily regulation. Girls receive messages that the ‘average healthy girl’ does not draw attention to her period or consider it unusual or special. Therefore, it could be argued that girls do not have access and/or the skills to speak about menstruation from a place of personal power. Within the critical literacy lesson this group’s girls able to take up, at least temporarily positions of knowledgeable power.

When the girls in the group were observed responding to the boys with remarks such as,

Haza:                That’s not how it is. We [girls] actually know about it.

Clara:                Boys don’t get their periods so you don’t know.

(Lucy’s Class, Observation field notes)

they were able to position themselves as knowledgeable. Constructed as a female experiences, girls often possess personal knowledge of menstruation. However, not all forms of knowledge are constituted as equal. Certain types of knowledge become

deemed as 'better' and are given more power to influence (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Knowledge constituted as expert informs our understandings, and indeed frames what is important to know (Fingerson, 2006; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). The doctor, the teacher, the vague 'expert' presented in many menstrual product advertisements are discursively constructed as objective and highly credible holders of knowledge. Speakers of other knowledge and who sit outside the dominant construction find themselves unrecognised or underrepresented in the dominant discourse constructing accepted knowledge (Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). Girls may find their lived experiences being denied as knowledge or 'truth' when it differs from the dominant discourses, and therefore removed from a position of power (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003). Girls will often reproduce the dominant discourses of menstruation even when their own experiences differ. For example, they will recreate discourse of menstruation as painful and disabling regardless of how much this might not represent their menstrual experience (Cosgrove & Riddle, 2003; Johnston-Robledo et al., 2006; Johnston-Robledo & Stubbs, 2013).

However, the power given and gained by knowledge is not immutable. While traditionally female experience is overlooked, the girls in the above example were able to position their knowledge as powerful. This knowledge gained by personal experience was, at least in that moment, constructed as powerful. Fingerson (2006) found that girls were able to use their personal knowledge to gain social power. This power involved the social control of interactions though using their knowledge to silence boys, making them uncomfortable by openly talking about menstruation or discussing it in ways that 'othered' boys, by excluding them from the conversation (Fingerson, 2006). Knowledge becomes power, and for these moments within the lesson, the girls were able to take up discourses of knowledge and from this position of knowledge holder they were able to exercise power with the interaction (Fingerson, 2006; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001). In all

the pre-lesson interviews involved in this research, and indeed interviews done during my Master of Arts research (Agnew, 2012), the girls all reported feeling embarrassed and reluctant to openly discuss menstruation, particularly with the male peers. During a conversation in a pre-lesson group interview, the students were asked what they would do to make learning about menstruation easier.

Researcher: What would make learning about menstruation easier then?

Bobbie-Jo: If the boys weren't there.

Susan: Yeah, especially when they laugh and look at you, like they are trying to work out if you have it or not.

Bobbie-Jo: Boys just like to make us embarrassed.

(Lisa's Class, Pre-Lesson Interview)

Also, after the lesson, when discussing using advertising to discussion menstruation, one of the girls also spoke of the potential for embarrassment.

Researcher: Did using advertising help [to talk about menstruation]?

Rebekah: Sort of, but not really. It's still, that, you know, and it will always be embarrassing to have to discuss it with other people. It's good we learn about it, but I wish it could be done without having to talk about it.

(Tina's Class, Post-Lesson Interview)

But yet, within the lesson's discussion on menstrual product advertising, the girls were able to find ways to exercise power that previously seemed overlooked and unrecognised (Davies, 2000).

The fact that menstruation is labelled a 'girl's thing' opened up the possibility for girls to use this discourse to exercise the power in the discussion. The experiences of menstruation labelled as a 'girls thing' may provide girls, even those yet to menstruate, access to discourses that position them as holding superior knowledge (Allen et al., 2011; Davies, 2000; Fingerson, 2006). In her interviews, Fingerson (2006) research into US teenagers views of menstruation found many girls believed boys would be unable to handle menstruation. Instead of the discursive construction of menstruation as being something negative about being a girl, consisting of pain, mood swings, and a constant need to manage bodily presentation, e.g. hygiene and appearance, they expressed pride in the responsibility of handling menstruation.

Participants' experiences suggested that menstruation is not simply a source of shame for woman, but it may also represent a source of power and knowledge (Allen et al., 2011, p. 134).

Fingerson (2006) and Allen et.al. (2011) represent a minority when it comes to discussing female power within discourse of menstruation. This may indicate that discourses of female pride and power are in the minority, or it could show how the hegemonic dominant discourses around menstruation obscure and limit the possibility and potential of these discourses.

However, these opportunities for girls to position themselves as powerful do not occur without reactions of resistance, for "[w]here there is power, there is always resistance" (Foucault, 1978, p. 95). Following the classroom lesson I was able to speak with the students. All except one of the girls from the group were present in the interview. I wanted to know about their reaction to the lesson, in particular the discourses of power and knowledge I have noted. During the group interview, I remarked on what I had

observed in the classroom lesson with a group of girls taken over the control of the classroom activity:

Researcher: This is another thing I picked up with the group you were in. In that group there seemed to be very much a division between boys and girls.

Quinten: Yes.

Researcher: Did you feel that as boys you didn't have as much of an opinion as the girls?

Quinten: Yeah.

Isadora: But it's about girls, it's their need sort of thing.

Clarence: But boys still have opinions

Researcher: Did you feel that the girls were willing to listen to your opinions?

Clarence: No.

Haza: I only wrote down the boys' answers.

Researcher: Why only the boys?

Haza: Because they kept getting annoyed and saying we weren't listening. And they would get angry if we wrote down something different.

Researcher: But did you both feel that you weren't allowed – that your opinion wasn't as important?

Quinten: Yeah

Clarence: They didn't want to know [one girl] kept talking when we were. Telling us no you're wrong, and that's not the right answer.

Haza: Yeah. I wrote down their opinions. It's just they didn't feel that we were listening as well. They just wanted their stuff written down.

Isadora:                They just didn't like us knowing more.

(Lucy's Class, Post-Lesson)

This discussion from the earlier lesson continued, however, the discussion also included Isadora, who had not been part of the original classroom group. Isadora appears to take up a strong position within the discourses constructing menstruation and menstrual knowledge as powerful. This can also be seen in her comment previously referenced, that "it's stuff that's important to girls, so that's the point". Isadora appears to associate menstruation with being a girl. But rather than constructing menstruation and her femaleness in negative ways, it could be read as a source of pride for her. For her, menstruation connects her to other girls and women. She speaks of menstruation with a plurality, girls and us, rather than just an individual isolated experience. In expressing it this way, she discursively positions herself with in a larger group of women. For her and many women, membership of this group provides her with both superior knowledge and a bodily ability to manage and overcome discomfort and the troublesome nature of menstruation (Fingerson, 2006). However, the making of the discussion on menstruation about women in general rather than the individual could be read as creating and maintaining discourses that disconnect menstruation from the personal. By discussing menstruation as being a 'girls' issue she is providing a way to distance herself from the details of her own experience (Newton, 2012).

The construction of menstruation as a 'female only' experience excludes boys from the female membership attributes and therefore provides girls opportunities of agency and power unavailable to boys (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). During another group's interview, one of the girls responded to a boy's complaint that puberty was hard for them

by saying “you don’t know how lucky you have it, you could never handle this” (Rebekah, Tina’s Class Pre-Lesson). This idea that boys cannot handle menstruation seems common amongst many girls (Fingerson, 2006). In describing pervious lessons on puberty, Haza, another girl reported:

“Last year [the teacher] showed us the pads and stuff, and the boys got weird, like freaked out or something. And I was like, if you can’t even look at it without getting upset, how could they possibly manage using it”

(Lucy’s Class, Pre-Lesson)

While many girls construct menstruation as bothersome and painful, they also believe their ability to deal with these symptoms not only separates them from boys and girls who have yet to begin menstruation, but makes them superior (Fingerson, 2006).

Nonetheless, even as she speaks from this potentially powerful position, Isadora also appears to realise a cost of challenging the dominant constructions. Later in the same group interview, when discussing issues of talking about menstruation in class she said:

I’m never quiet. I talk and talk. [My friends] say “shut up Isadora”, and people stop listening. They know I’ll just say a lot of stuff, that it’s all just really silly stuff.

(Lucy’s Class, Post-Lesson)

Therefore, while she speaks from a discursive position of menstruation equalling female power, she also inhabits a compliant position with the hegemonic dominant discourses that devalue and dismiss the female experience. Foucault (1978) in his discussion of power and sex presented the idea that a dominant power in dealing with sex was prohibition. It required that you “[r]enounce yourself or suffer the penalty of being suppressed; do not appear if you do not want to disappear” (Foucault, 1978, p. 84). It could then be said that Isadora knew by speaking from discourses that challenge the

hegemonic power of traditional constructions of menstruation and gender would result in her being dismissed and devalued in the same ways as menstruation is. Paechter (2006), working from Foucault's (1979) ideas of panoptic power relations where communities and people are systematically but subtly ordered and controlled, determined three main consequences for deviations from the dominant discourse:

expulsion from the group (a particularly heavy penalty for many teenagers; Head, 1997; Hey, 1997), perpetual peripherality (welcomed by some individuals but highly problematic to others) or even physical attacks such as 'queer-bashing'. (Paechter, 2006, p. 22)

It could be read that Isadora constructs herself as positioned on the periphery with the label of 'the girl that is always talking'. This seems to be a position she has accepted, although it is unknown how desirable it might be for her. However, other forms of constraint may overtly produce judgment and examination meant to enforce conformity (Foucault, 1979; Norton, 2011). Weedon (1997) talks about there being a cost for those that challenge dominant discourses or take up alternative subject positions. In taking up a different subject position, members of social communities and peer groups risk forms of retaliations. In her classroom work with children to address sexism and sexuality through poetry, Norton (2011) found her students faced ridicule and negative labelling as a result of challenging dominant discourses about silencing ideas of sexuality, especially in relation to children's lives. During the public performances, the students were criticised not for the quality of their poems, or even as much for the content, but instead for the perceived breaking of a taboo. Dominant discourses not only silence alternatives, but are also used to construct these differences as abnormal or abhorrent. Failure to maintain the prescription of the constructed feminine ideal may result in harsh and negative judgement (Foucault, 1979). Fahs (2012, 2013) found in her university classes involving participatory activism, both in menstruation (Fahs, 2013) and body hair (Fahs, 2012), that while the experiences of resisting and challenging dominant



discourses had profound personal changes in the students, it also exposed them to disgust and ridicule, both from friends and strangers. By making the alternative subjectivity as unappealing as possible dominant discourses maintain their power.

The idea that challenges to dominant power relations may result in the person being positioned in potentially negative ways could also be seen in the discussion I had with the class' teacher. When speaking to her about the interaction I observed around power, especially involving the one observed group and how the girls took leadership roles in the activity and were met with resistance from the boys in their group. Lucy said:

They're quite confident personalities and very sort of achievement – what's the word? Very driven, especially the one here. Very very driven. Don't really care about what the boys think. That one in particular is very... driven, she doesn't really care what it might look like.

(Teacher Interview)

While she was talking about a different girl, someone that was not part of the interview group, there could be read the same penalty for speaking from a challenging discourse. She did appear very careful in choosing the words she wanted to use, perhaps to not offend. However, one reading could be that not caring what others think was not a coveted position, and instead undesirable and an aberration from the norm. The girl's personality and behaviour marked her as different, and therefore her contributions may also be dismissed as a divergence. It could also be noted that boys are often praised or recognised for achievement within schools (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011; Renold & Allan, 2006). While girls achieve academic success, some girls report they receive less positive attention from their teachers for this achievement (Pomerantz & Raby, 2011). Therefore, girls often have to engage in a precarious balancing act of achievement and femininity (Renold & Allan, 2006). When girls show ambition and assertiveness within

the classroom setting they may be faced with judgements of being pushy or 'little madams' (Reay, 2001; Renold & Allan, 2006). Maintaining traditional feminine discourses often take precedence over academic success. Therefore the term 'driven' in Lucy's description of the girl's behaviour could be read as a critical interpretation that her academic focus is at the detriment of her acceptability as a girl (Renold, 2001). Although it needs to be acknowledged that this is just one of multiple readings of Lucy's comments. It is possible to read the comment as a celebration of the driven nature of the student. The fact that she does not "really care what boy's think" may be offered as a positive trait rather than a personal failing.

However, from the poststructuralist perspective of everything potentially having multiple meanings, these examples can be read in different ways. Isadora may indeed take pride in being seen as vocal. Her friends and peers may not like that she is outspoken but this does not seem to deter her or cause her to relinquish this alternative subjectivity. Indeed, she could be seen as embracing it. Resisting dominant discourse and taking up alternative subjectivities never follows a straight and stable line (Foucault, 1978). Acts of resistance do not occur in one glorious moment. They can come in waves of bright opposition only to have that opposition retreat into compliance. This can be seen in the multiple readings of potential power and potential compliance in both Isadora's and Lucy's comments. We can also see it within Haza's comment. Haza spoke of an awareness of the boys' reaction and resistance to discourses that do not necessarily position them as powerful. It could be taken that she saw the lesson as presenting alternative discourses that challenged the dominant construction but did not want to face the costs of taken it up, or perhaps saw nothing beneficial in her doing so. She does not appear to be acting in compliance with the traditional discourses, her compliance seems to be more in placating the annoyed boys. Her own subjectivity may reside in discourses

that promote empathy and compromise as good feminine traits, or unlike Isadora she may not wish to be dismissed and devalued for taking up resistant discourses.

### **Acts of resistance to challenge or reinforce dominant power relations**

The classroom critical literacy lessons opened up the possibilities for exploring alternative constructions for menstruation. The dialogues occurring within the lesson also provided opportunities for points of resistance. However, resistance within power relations are not all encompassing, as Foucault (1978) argues, “there is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary” (p. 95). As power and resistance are constantly interacting, acts of resistance that may be seen as powerful will in turn result in resistance against them. Constituted within dominant discourses of menstruation as something shameful and/or unimportant, the participants within this research often (re)created the dominant discourses in response to alternative positionings. For example, the teachers involved in the research all expressed a strong interest in using critical literacy through other curriculum topics “this is really how we should be teaching, encouraging our kids to think critically, not just repeat” (Tina, Teacher Interview). However, some expressed dismay at the topic choice “I was surprised when I saw the topic, I mean, critical literacy seems really interesting, but why talk about [menstruation]” (Lisa, Teachers’ Workshop 1). Lisa reproduced many of the discourses around secrecy and shame during our conversations, therefore she could be seen as deeply constituted within these discourses. Her dismay at my research topic can be read as resistance to the perceived shifts in power relations. This resistance does not occur with an overt refusal to address the topic, or an attack on the ideas presented, but rather a reinforcing of dominant discourses and representing them as a known truth or common sense that cannot be disputed.

Lisa's resistance to the alternative constructions of menstruation shows another way power is maintained against acts of resistance. Alongside the possibility that acts of resistance may result in being positioned in negative and unfavourable ways, the ways dominant discourse are created produces a self-disciplining process that maintains power (Foucault, 1979; St. Pierre, 2000). Lisa's reluctance to engage with the topic of menstruation was not any indication of her teaching ability or commitment to the education of her students. What it can be read as, is the way power within the dominant discourses fixes her gaze so as to make the ideas of secrecy and shame seem common-sense and natural. The dominant discourses maintain their position within the power relations by mechanisms of self-discipline which control what is determined as knowable and true (St. Pierre, 2000). Resistance within these power relations occurs in the "points, knots or focuses" (Foucault, 1978, p. 96). Therefore, acts of resistance occur when someone's gaze is shifted and new meanings become possible. During one of the teacher workshops a screen grab of an UbyKotex advertisement was used as an example (Doco., 2015).

It showed three women in a predominantly white room. Two women were seated together looking relaxed and the third woman was sitting by herself with an uncomfortable posture. The written text in the advertisement read 'Rule 03: Avoid White Seats'. The workshop discussion focused on how the advertisement may appear to disrupt the dominant discourse, but one reading of the advertising text could be that it is saying it is not the rule that is wrong, but the choice of menstrual product. Buy the right product and you will be safe from repercussions of failing the menstrual rules (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009). During the discussion about the screenshot of the

UbyKotex advertistment and the discourses being (re)created in both the written and visual texts, one teacher noted:

I know the ad, but I've never noticed it before, those two [women], they're bullies, they're this little click of girls making fun of the other. That's everything we tell our kids here not to be, not to do. But in this ad, because the woman is not doing it right, it seen as funny to tease her. So what does that say, like you said, about the rules and consequences of breaking them. Now I've seen it and thinking about what you've been saying. They are, if you'll excuse me, so bitchy. And we are holding this up as a good message to the kids, that in menstruation it's just fine to tease those that don't do it right.

(Pennsy, Teachers' Workshop 3)

During the workshops I promoted a critical literacy investigation of power by the participants. In asking questions about how the advertisement text depicts the women represented and calls upon the readers' knowledge of dominant constructions, menstruation encourages the reader to make the power relations visible and opening for examination. In doing so we all, as participants in this research, engaged in exploration of power relations and resistance. For Pennsy, this resistance occurred in the moments she was able to read "bullying" in the text and connect it the ways menstruation is regulated for women. With the previous exposure to this advertisement she accepted the text without considering how it was used to maintain the power within the dominant constructions of menstruation. One of the ways dominant discourse are used to maintain and reinforce tradition power relations is to construct alternative discourse as risky (Davies, 2000). Pennsy recognises this construction when she makes visible the depictions of bullying in the advertisement. While I and the other teachers had critiques of different aspects of the advertisement, we all failed to recognise the bullying behaviour, possibly because it is constructed in a way that seems normal. By making the representation of bullying visible and connecting it with what they

tell the students “not to be, not to do.” Pennsy was able to create resistance that drew other people into challenging the discourse of shame that constructs our understandings menstruation. While, according to Foucault (1997, cited in St. Pierre, 2000) power relations exist in every social world because there is freedom everywhere. Sometimes this freedom exists only in narrow margins. Therefore, resistance able to disrupt these power relations calls upon “mobilising groups of individuals in definitive ways, inflaming certain points of the body, certain moments in life, certain types of behaviour” (Foucault, 1978, p. 96). In this example, Pennsy uses the anti-bully discourse that is dominant within schools to support her resistance to the discourse presented in the advertisement. It could be read as Pennsy using the power of one discourse, anti-bullying, to disrupt discourses constructing menstruation as humiliating and shameful.

Pennsy’s act of resistance does not create a new absolute way of constructing menstruation as positive, nor will it remove unwanted discourses from the relation of power. But as Haperin (1995, cited in St. Pierre, 2000) states “the aim of an oppositional politics is therefore not liberation but resistance” (p. 492). Acts of resistance are always ongoing and often quite fragile (Jackson & Cram, 2003; St. Pierre, 2000). As researchers and educators, we may wish to present menstruation as a positive celebrated experience, however, this discourse often gets dismissed as too far-fetched and unbelievable. Even as the participants discussed alternative ways of consider menstruation, the power of dominant discourse appear to negate and qualify the alternatives. Therefore, during the workshop when I discussed the potential of offering new ways to construct meaning about menstruation, the idea of celebration was still considered unrealistic.

Lisa: It’s important that we teach that this is a natural and very important stage in a girl’s life I’m just not sure anyone actually wants to celebrate it.

While Lisa positioned herself within the discourses that promote menstruation as a natural and positive experience and marker of femaleness, she also takes up the discourses that construct menstruation as something bothersome and not to be openly discussed. There are always multiple discourses working to construct our understandings. They may often battle and contract each other and at times co-exist (Gavey, 1989; Weedon, 1997). The ways we take up dominant discourse as defining a 'truth' can make it difficult for alternative constructions that may challenge and resist these dominant positions (Gavey, 1989; Scott, 1988; Weedon, 1997). Therefore resistance is an ongoing practice. There may be times resistance occurs in a large confrontation, in the violent act of resistance. But more often it is moments of resistance, of finding a point of challenge that open possibilities or calling upon an examination of how we constituted ourselves (Foucault, 1978; St. Pierre, 2000).

One example of this occurred when discussing the benefits and advantages of using advertisements, the girls in the interview group all responded about the ways it made talking easier and reduced feelings of exposure to ridicule. In the middle of this conversation, one boy remarked "I don't see the point, it's like a McDonald's ad except with a lady on it" (Doug, Tina's Class, Post-lesson Interview). This comment could be read as an attempt to silence the conversation of menstruation. Boys often refuse to participate in discussions about menstruation either by leaving the location or actively avoiding participation through disengaging or disruptive behaviour (Allen et al., 2011; Buston, Wight, & Hart, 2002; Chrisler, 2013; Fingerson, 2006). Boys will often distance themselves from any connection with femininity as a way to develop and protect their

own sense of masculinity (Buston et al., 2002; Fingerson, 2006). As Fingerson (2006) note for one of the boys in her study “if the first syllable of ‘period’ is spoken, he said that he would be out the door” (p .114). While Doug chose to remain within the interview group, his comment may point to an attempt to construct our discussion on the advantages of using advertisements to talk about menstruation as faulty and irrelevant. As the conversation prior to his comment was all female participants discussing a female experience, he may possibly have been attempting to diminish and resist the ways menstruation was being constructed as important and significant. Even with the awareness that the interviews were to discuss menstruation and the critical literacy lesson, Doug may be expressing his confusion over the focus on advertising or his own disconnect from the topic. For Doug, these menstrual product advertisements are as irrelevant to him as junk food advertising, indeed, even more so because there is a “lady on it”. As resistance to the perceived power girls possess with their knowledge and experiences, boys may try to shut down discussions that exclude them (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). In this case, Doug’s declaration that the advertisement and therefore the discussion about them was pointless could be read as an attempt to diminish any power position the girls may take up.

Alongside attempts to diminish or dismiss the potential for girls to speak from positions of knowledge about menstruation, resistance to shifts in power relations also consisted of attempts to refocus back onto boys’ experiences. When faced with lessons, and group discussions that focused on female experiences boys often presented a ‘what about us?’ response.

Clarence:           Why aren’t there boy ads? We don’t get stuff to look at?

(Lucy’s Class, Post-lesson)



Boy student: All of them are about the girl thing

(Response to teacher putting up a variety of menstruation ads, Tina's Class Field notes)

Tony: It's really boring, I don't see why girls need so much attention about this?"

(Lisa's Class, Post-Lesson)

These responses to the lesson's focus on menstruation draw upon dominant discourses that construct menstruation as irrelevant and shameful. These discourses are not new, and indeed as so accepted they seldom have to be reinforced. Television programmes and movies often, take up discourses of embarrassment, making menstruation the punchline to a derisive joke about being female (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Kissling, 2002). Boys come to know and expect this construction, with menstruation a topic they can openly practice male power (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Lees, 1994; Thornton, 2013). Boys often understand their experiences of puberty and sexual development will be given more space and positive construction within the lessons of puberty and sexuality education (Allen, 2004; Diorio & Munro, 2000). Therefore, a focus on menstruation in ways that opened up space for girls to speak of their experiences and a promotion of alternative discourses may have been interpreted as a challenge on the dominant discursive hegemony. The boys' attempt to refocus attention back on them can be read as resistance to this shift of power.

## Conclusion

This findings chapter examined the ways power worked within the learning and understanding of menstruation. Dominant constructions of menstruation often relegate the experience to being "girls' stuff" and therefore dismissed as unimportant. Girls are

often encouraged to remain silent and secretive about menstruation, while boys view the topic as having no value, or take up discourses of shame to use in derogatory ways against girls (Allen et al., 2011; Fingerson, 2006). However, this research also showed ways girls were constructing their information and experience as “special knowledge” (Fingerson, 2006). Using their first-hand experience and knowledge they were able to position themselves in powerful and exclusive ways. When Clara says to the boys in her group “boys don’t get their periods, so you don’t know”, she positions herself, at least in that moment, as being more knowledgeable and potentially as an expert due to her femaleness (Fingerson, 2006; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2001).

With power being everywhere, so is resistance (Foucault, 1978). By conducting critical literacy workshops and lessons, moments of resistance were created to challenge the dominant discourses construing menstruation. However, while these resistances provide opportunities for new ways to create knowledge, this is not a grand moment of change (Foucault, 1978). Acts of resistance may be fragile and the power of dominant discourses may make alternative discursive constructions seem unrealistic and unattainable (Jackson & Cram, 2003; St. Pierre, 2000).

The next chapter investigates the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy and the powerful ways it constructs our knowledge and understanding of menstruation. I start by examining the ways teachers have taken up the discourses of shame and secrecy and explore the impact this may have as they engage with and explore a critical literacy approach to the lesson on menstruation. In observing the lessons in the classroom and interviewing small groups of the student participants, I look at the ways critical literacy affected the take up and/or resistance of this discourse. Finally, I report how students

navigate discourses of shame and secrecy as well as engage with alternative discourse on menstruation.

## **Chapter Six: (Re)producing, Taking Up and Resisting Discourses of Shame and Secrecy**

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### **Introduction**

As discussed in the previous chapter, lessons on menstruation may act to (re)produce dominant power relations by positioning the menstruating woman as 'other' and creating numerous regulations on the behaviours and appearances that have been taken up as 'common-sense' and/or simple 'truths'. The previous chapter also explored the way the critical literacy approach to teaching menstruation may promote opportunities of resistance and create spaces to explore alternative relations of power. The ways we interact with power relations, in taking them up and in resistance, informs how we are constituted and how we constitute ourselves. Dominant power relations (re)create discourses that reinforce the construction of our understandings of menstruation. In discussing the construction of menstruation in chapter three's literature review, I outlined dominant discourse of hygiene, management, reproduction, and shame and secrecy which contribute to our understanding of menstruation. In this chapter I explore one of these discourses, the construction of menstruation as secretive and shameful, in greater detail.

Shame and secrecy remains a dominant discourse within our understandings of menstruation (Burrows & Johnson, 2005; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Newton, 2012). Discourses of shame and secrecy create menstruation as a worrisome event. Women are told they must keep their menstrual status hidden, showing no signs either in behaviour or appearance. Women often take up this discourse constructing the discovery of their menstrual status as highly humiliating. The dominance of this discourse of secrecy has resulted in the construction of invisibility around menstruation. So, while at any given time women will be menstruating, no women must ever be

acknowledged as menstruating (Diorio & Munro, 2000). The discourse of shame is deeply connected with the discourse of secrecy. One works to (re)produce the other. Therefore I discuss them in tandem, exploring the ways discourses of shame construct menstruation as embarrassing and often a failing of acceptable femininity. In looking at the ways the discourses of shame and secrecy influence our understandings of menstruation, this chapter explores how the participants constitute themselves within these discourses, and the impact a critical literacy teaching approach has on the way the discourses are taken up and/or resisted.

While many people may use the terms 'shame' and 'embarrassment' interchangeably, in regards to this thesis they indicate two different constructed meanings. As stated above, shame remains a dominant discourse in the construction of menstruation. Within this construction, shame can be considered the "deep-down-inside feeling that one is unworthy, unvalued, defective and unlovable" (Cavanaugh, 1989, cited in Lee, 2009, p. 616). The focus of menstruation education on hygiene often reinforces a stigma of uncleanness that may silence and shame girls and produce internalised disgust in their bodies. (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Johnston-Robledo & Chrisler, 2011; Rembeck, Möller, & Gunnarsson, 2006). As discussed later in this chapter, the construction of menstruation as shameful can become so dominant it is considered a "truth" even when presented with alternative discursive constructions of menstruation. So whereas shame can be connected to feeling unvalued and wrong, embarrassment can be seen as an emotional reaction to a new and uncertain situation. In discussing boys and young men's reactions to menstruation, Allen et. al, (2011) found many of the male participants later put their embarrassment down to issues of naivety and arrogance. Both boys and girls potentially construct the changes that occur during puberty as a nuisance and/or source of embarrassment, with new and confusing physical and social changes (Diorio & Munro,

2000). Very closely connected to the idea of shame is the need to keep things hidden. As discussed in my literature review, this requirement to conceal menstruation often leads to no women at any time ever showing any indication menstruation exists (Diorio & Munro, 2000). While individuals may choose to maintain their own privacy, concealment, the regulation to keep things hidden, is imposed upon them, and any failure to comply may lead to being seen as less competent, unattractive and unlikeable (Burrows & Johnson, 2005).

As an overview, this chapter starts with *Teacher Workshops*, which presents the results of my analysis of these workshops. With the understanding that everyone is constituted within a discursively constructed world, the dominant discourses around menstruation may have a major, although often unrecognised impact on the ways the participants understood and spoke about menstruation. I examine these constructions of teachers' own understandings and how the critical literacy questions asked within the workshop encouraged them to (re)consider and challenge the dominant discourses. Next, in *Classroom observations* I report observations of the classroom engagement with critical literacy during lessons on menstrual product advertisement. Within this section, *Observation – UbyKotex, Break the Cycle* presents one particular classroom interaction as an example of how a critical literacy approach may be used within the classroom to examine both the overt and covert (re)creation of the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy. This leads into the final section, *Potential for discursive shifts*, where I discuss how the students take up or resist these dominant discourses and how they navigate engaging with alternative discourses, both within the classroom lessons, and during the interview discussions about menstruation and puberty education.

### **Teacher workshops**

As educators, we work to create puberty and sexuality education lessons that promote physical and mental well-being. The Ministry of Education Health and Physical Education curriculum document for the Positive Puberty unit presents developing “a positive attitude towards the changes they experience during puberty” as a key concept (Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 7). Therefore, even while much of the traditional menstruation lesson focuses on hygiene management (Agnew, 2012; Diorio & Munro, 2000), teachers are seeking to provide information that will enhance and create confidence in dealing with the pubertal changes. However, teaching puberty and sexuality education involves talking about more personal and intimate details than other subject matters (Munro & Ballard, 2004). Teachers’ awareness of the influence they have on their students’ constructed subjectivities may lead to some teachers feeling overwhelmed or lacking in confidence when it comes to teaching puberty and sexuality education (Goldman & Coleman, 2013; Munro & Ballard, 2004). This potential uncertainty alongside the unexamined nature of the dominant discourses of menstruation may lead to teachers to (re)produce discourses of shame and secrecy.

The discourses of shame and secrecy that construct our understandings of menstruation have become so dominant in our society we seldom recognise their use and impact in our daily lives. Teachers are not exempt from being constituted within these discourses and therefore may find the idea that menstruation could be viewed favourably unrealistic. During the teachers’ workshops, the idea that the critical literacy approach may open up possibilities for menstruation to be constructed as a positive, exciting milestone, or indeed, a celebration was discussed. However, most of the teacher participants expressed some degree of disbelief:

Pennsy: We want our girls to feel positive about themselves, but it's going to be a hard sell for them, and probably other teachers, the idea of menstruation as exciting.

(Teachers Critical Literacy Workshop 3)

Tina: It's menstruation, its sort of...

Patsy: Gross and horrible.

Tina: Ha, yeah. But we don't want the girls to focus on that. We try to help them feel comfortable with what's happening.

Patsy: But we've also got to be realistic. Nothing we'll do will completely change things. The fact is it's embarrassing. Even more so when you're twelve. So there's no point telling girls it isn't embarrassing, more so helping them deal with that embarrassment.

(Teachers Critical Literacy Workshop 1)

All the teachers involved in this research expressed the desire to teach menstruation in ways that helped their students understand menstruation in positive terms. However, we can also see from the above comments that menstruation is "gross and horrible" and that "it's embarrassing" the discourses that construct menstruation in negative and embarrassing terms work to limit the opportunities to explore different constructions. Along with delivering content, the teaching of puberty and sexuality education also involves discussions and explorations of attitudes, values and diversity (Diorio & Munro, 2003; Munro & Ballard, 2004). Therefore, the discourses teachers take up to construct their understanding of menstruation will impact the knowledge presented in the lesson. Patsy wants to help the girls she teaches deal with their embarrassment, however her



own constructions of menstruation as “gross and horrible” may act to reinforce the construction of embarrassment, and/or work to (re)create it with her students.

The power of dominant discourses often occurs in the ability of a discourse to go unchallenged (Kenway et al., 1994). Patsy states above “Nothing we’ll do will completely change things. The fact is it’s embarrassing”. The discourses of shame and secrecy that inform her understanding appear to be a simple “truth”. She knows this embarrassment to be an undeniable fact. From the framework of poststructuralism and critical theory, I present the idea that there are multiple discourses, working to construct meaning, therefore meaning itself is multiple and transitory (Kenway et al., 1994; St. Pierre, 2000). Therefore, while not denying the presence of discourses, like shame and secrecy, the research attempted to provide opportunities for other discourses to be seen and examined. The possibility of other ways of understanding menstruation may be, as Pennsy said “a hard sell”. Indeed, earlier in the same workshop another teacher spoke of an alternative culture’s menarche celebration. During a discussion about her time in Japan, the teacher referenced an aspect of Japanese culture that she saw as celebratory:

Lucy: In Japan, when a girl gets her period they have red rice. The family sit down and they have their red rice

(Teachers Critical Literacy Workshop 1)

This description offers an opening to allow the idea of celebration to be seen. However, even with knowledge of this possibility of celebration, Patsy still appears, with her statement above, to accept the discourses that construct menstruation as negative and bothersome as an established and unquestionable ‘truth’. And while she wants to present her students with ways that may lessen the negative impact of menstruation she

still (re)produces the same dominant discourses as 'truth' (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002; Kenway et al., 1994). It is this unquestioned 'truth' attributed to specific discourses that makes it difficult for alternative and challenging discourses to become viable (Scott, 1988; St. Pierre, 2000).

Patsy's dismissal of discourses that sit outside of the dominant construction of menstruation in turn (re)produce this construction as fact, and 'just the way it is'. The power given dominant discourses to relegate other discourses that construct menstruation in positive and exciting ways as unrealistic and fanciful can be read in her comment. Even as she volunteers to participate in research designed to open up the view of menstruation to other possible discursive constructions, she still remains constituted within the dominant discourses. This also can be seen in Pennsy's comment during a different workshop. Pennsy constructing the idea of excitement as a "hard sell" may indicate an awareness of how the dominant discourses are used to maintain a particular construction of menstruation (Costos et al., 2002; Kenway et al., 1994; Kissling, 1996a). The construction of menstruation in positive celebratory terms is not unheard of, indeed in times when women's labour was an economic necessity demonstration was constructed as a positive celebration of health and in many non-Western cultures celebratory rituals and ceremonies mark menarche (Kissling, 2002).. However, in much of current Western society, menstruation is still considered bothersome and embarrassing.

Constructing menstruation as unquestionably bothersome and embarrassing, other discourses get side-lined or completely dismissed:

Within post-structuralism there are always multiple meanings that have the potential to be taken up, and indeed, become dominant. However, the discourse constructing these alternative meanings may become hidden (Gavey, 1989; Kenway et al., 1994; St. Pierre, 2000). However, I argue that by providing workshops and teacher training, we can offer an opportunity for these teachers to explore their own constructions. Dominant discourses still constructed menstruation as being “terrible” for Victoria, but the workshop encouraged her curiosity and therefore had the potential to challenge her own constructed meaning.

The workshops started the process of the examination of dominant discursive constructions of menstruation. While the participants appeared eager to create lesson experiences that would encourage exploration of the discourses creating menstruation, in the workshop we first needed to make these discourses and how they constituted menstruation visible. Alongside introducing critical literacy and its application in the teaching of puberty and sexuality education, part of the role of the workshops involved encouraging the teachers to ask themselves the same critical literacy questions. As part of the workshop I displayed an image taken from a website “Lunagals” that was promoting the use of menstrual cups as a management tool (Siemens & Shaw, n.d.). The image showed three women, they were of various body sizes, two were white and one was black. They all appeared jovial and happy, holding up signs that promoted switching to the menstrual cup. One of the women held a sign that said “I [heart] my period”. I asked why these images, of happy excited women, proud of their periods were not often seen in advertising.

Lucy: But the smiling and the dancing, it’s not that realistic.

Researcher: But the miserable, pain filled woman is [realistic]?

Lucy: <laugh> That’s how it is though.

Researcher: Is it? All of the time?

Lucy: No, of course not all of the time, but that's how we think about it.

Researcher: That's the point of this. We tell kids, especially girls that it's a normal healthy thing, but all the images, all the texts present it negatively. This is so dominant we look at happiness as a lie.

(Teachers workshop 1)

Like the classroom lessons, the idea of using the principles of critical literacy within the workshop was not to impose one set of meaning as more 'true'. I was not seeking to construct the idea of happiness or celebration as a new or better truth. Instead, I was hoping to make visible an alternative discourse that while often dismissed and negated could still be taken up as a viable way to construct menstruation. In doing so, it also challenged the unquestioned construction of dominant discourses. When Lucy validated the construction of menstruation as miserable with her statement of "that's how it is though" she also reproduced and reinforced the dominant constructed meaning of menstruation. By opening the possibility of alternative meanings, the intended result was not to produce a dramatic and permanent change in how she constructed menstruation. Instead, I hoped to present opportunities that would encourage her to question the ways she creates and is created through the dominant discourse around menstruation.

In the workshops we investigated these discursive constructions of menstruation in advertising by getting the teachers to explore with the same critical literacy questions they would employ in their classroom lessons. Menstrual product companies often rely heavily on (re)producing the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy to sell their products (Raftos et al., 1998; Simes & Berg, 2001). Therefore, in asking these questions

about how the variety of texts construct menstruation the subtle and hidden ways discourses work to maintain dominant constructions become recognised. During a discussion on how to use a UbyKotex Advertisement to ask questions about the choices the author made, the teachers were able to take up the agentic ideas of making visible and critiquing the discourses used within the advertisement. The advertisement taken from AdNews shows three woman all seated in a pure white room (AdNews, 2012). Two women are seated on the left, they appear to be having a good time, laughing and smiling as they look across at a third woman. This woman on the right is perched on the edge of a black stool. Unlike the other woman she seems tense and uncomfortable, and is looking away from the other two women. Above them is the text “Rule 03. Avoid white seats”.

- Researcher: This is from a New Zealand TV ad.
- Tina: Avoid white seats. Oh my gosh. So what's it advertising then?
- Researcher: I think, yes, it's a UbyKotex ad. I think it's for tampons.
- Tina: The first time I saw it, it was more just that she didn't feel like should could join in.
- Lisa: I can see that. Then you can ask why, why does the ad show her that way? Does having your period make you, mean you can't have any fun?
- Tina: Yeah, but have a closer look at their faces, it almost looks like it's set up as a ...
- Lisa: Oh that's terrible.
- Tina: The body language, yeah. There is the whole you're not acceptable. We don't like you because you've got your period and you're not doing it right.

Lisa: That's shocking. It's there in the ad, we see these all the time but never really notice what they are saying.

(Teachers' Workshop 1)

On first reading of this advertisement, the message often determined by those participating in this research confirms with Tina's reading; use this product or you will not be able to join in. This message is a common tactic amongst advertisers of menstrual products who claim only their product will enable the maintenance of acceptable femininity (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Mazzarella, 2008; Raftos et al., 1998). It supplies strong starting points for a critical literacy approach with questions like Lisa's about why the advertisement choose to present women and menstruation in a particular way. When Lisa asks "then you can ask why, why does the ad show her that way", her question enables the workshop participants to investigate multiple readings of the advertisement and to identify the multiple discourses at work to construct our meaning. Within the discussion of the ways the advertisement represented the women, Tina and Lisa, were also able to identify discourses that built on the constructions of menstruation as shameful. As Tina concluded "there is the whole you're not acceptable. We don't like you because you've got your period and you're not doing it right." I argue here that Tina's questioning of the choices the author made in this text, in how they presented the women, enabled her to make visible discourses of shame and secrecy. The woman on the right is not acceptable because she is menstruating, a shameful act, and also because she is not successfully maintaining the secrecy around this. As Tina states she is "not doing it right". While these discourses were not explicit, therefore remaining hidden and unrecognised, they still contribute to the construction of menstruation and the constitution of the menstruating subject. While identifying the discourses of shame and secrecy will not automatically remove the impact they have on how we determine our understandings. However, by making the discourses and how

they work visible, we create space to explore our own understandings and to reconsider the degree we take up or reject the discursive construction presented.

This idea of providing opportunities for multiple readings and challenging the dominant understanding became a key component within the critical literacy lessons. The two examples recorded in observational field notes show the way critical literacy questions encouraged the students to think about the dominant discourses of menstruation as shameful and secret. The lessons also provide an opportunity for some students to challenge both the way the advertisement conveyed its message and also present multiple and alternative readings of the text.

### **Class observations.**

During the observed lessons, the teachers' initial questions were in regards to what the advertisements were trying to say. During these lessons, the students identified messages that encouraged women to not feel ashamed of menstruation. As stated earlier, menstrual product advertising often presents the idea that their product prevents issues of shame. The commonality of these advertisements along with explicit messages within Puberty and Sexuality Education that menstruation should not be shameful may result in the ease of identifying this reading. This commonly identified message that the students reproduce within the lesson could show that students are taking up opportunities to explore alternative discourse that create menstruation in a different way and challenge the dominant discourses. However, a majority of recent research into menstruation still reports significant stigma and shame attached to menstruation (e.g. Chrisler, 2013; Erchull, 2013; Newton, 2012; Thornton, 2013). Therefore, while not dismissing students expressing alternative discourses, it may

appear any challenge to dominant discourses remains fleeting. However, agency and change within a poststructuralist framework is always transitory and small. We do not seek the one great moment of refusal that creates a new outlook, but rather the ongoing building of small moments that open up opportunities and create questions (Foucault, 1978).

The students' comments, during the observed lessons, of menstruation not being shameful and there being no need to hide may also be read as an indication of the impact of the dominant discourses. Advertisers of menstrual products often rely on dominant discourses of shame and secrecy to sell their products. By producing advertisements that draw on these discourses the menstrual product companies (re)create and maintain the dominance of discourses of shame and secrecy. Instead of challenging these dominant discourses, the advertisement supports the necessity of them, but reassures women that their particular product is best suited and the easiest way to comply (Block Coutts & Berg, 1993; Merskin, 1999). This use of dominant discourse within the advertisement to sell their product may contribute to the students commonly reproducing the same discourse in their answers. During the observed lessons, none of the teachers initiated conversations about shame and secrecy. Indeed, during one of the one of the workshops a teacher said "we are always very careful about not making menstruation shameful" (Pennsy, Workshop 3). However, when asked what the advertisement was saying, the majority of their responses were about not being afraid or embarrassed. As one group reported the text was "trying to sell tampons by saying you don't have to be afraid" (Classroom observation, activity sheet). Therefore it could be said that students have already taken up the dominant discourses that are commonly expressed about menstruation.



The dominant discourses (re)created in texts often work as they remain unchallenged and invisible. The critical literacy lesson aims to encourage questions about the texts we interact with every day rather than simply taking them up to construct our understanding (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). In terms of this research, these are texts about menstruation. By providing questions that directed and scaffolded the investigation of the advertisement texts, teachers encouraged multiple readings from their students and examined the ways they constituted themselves and are constituted within the texts.

### **Observation – UbyKotex, Break the Cycle.**

In the beginning of the classroom lesson, Tina had her class sit as a full group in front of a large white board. She introduced the lesson, stating “we will be looking at what ads for menstruation products say to us”. In using “we” Tina could be seen as including herself in the discussion, rather than being outside of it. On displaying the first advertisement, Tina pointed out and asked questions about various aspects of the text, the writing, the pictures, the colouring used. This acted as scaffolding that helped focus the students into their analysis of the text.

After discussing the first advertisement, Tina then displayed an UbyKotex advertisement that was part of their 2010 ‘Break the Cycle’ campaign. The advertisement from POPSOP showed the torso (waist to neck) of a woman crossing a city street (Rudenko, 2010). The primary written text says “I was terrified my tampon would fall out of my purse when I took my wallet out”. At the bottom left of the advertisement is “Why are 85% of girls afraid to be seen with a tampon? Break the Cycle”. Next to this are three boxes of UbyKotex tampons, and a forwarding web link to “Get a Sample”.

Tina started the conversation by asking what the message of the advertisement was. The answers were along the lines of most of the initial observed responses to these advertisements, with most of the students replying that the advertisement was telling them not to be afraid of having tampons or there was nothing embarrassing about using them. Tina then asked a question about both the displayed advertisements.

Tina: Who is shown in the ads?

Girl 1: Women.

Tina: That's right, there are women in both, why do you think...

Girl 2: But it isn't a woman, it's only part of them.

Tina: Oh that's interesting, why do you think they only showed part of them?

Boy 1: Because it's about the tampons, not about the girl.

Girl 1: But girls have periods so it is about them.

Boy 2: Maybe the girl is embarrassed to be in the full picture.

Tina: You wrote the message was not to be embarrassed.

Girl 1: That's what the writing says.

Girl 2: But the woman is hiding.

Tina: So the writing and the picture are saying different things?

Girl 2: Yeah. It's like telling us both things. It is embarrassing. Don't be embarrassed. Which one are we supposed to believe?

(Tina's Class Observation, Field Notes)

The initial reading of this advertisement, as well as others appears to be a literal comprehension of the text with many students reporting the advertisement was saying not to be embarrassed. While this reading is no less or no more valid a reading, it may also contribute to the (re)production of dominant discourses that (re)create menstruation as shameful and something that must remain hidden. So the critical literacy lesson asks students to consider texts beyond meaning making comprehension and to engage with questions of why and how the texts are created (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). In asking her students to consider who is represented in the text, some students were able to identify and examine a variety multiple and contradictory discourses within the text. This contradiction that Girl 2 points out “It is embarrassing. Don’t be embarrassed” may provide an opportunity to investigate the discourses contributing to the embarrassment. Each of the students’ ideas of why the authors choose to represent the women in the text as partially hidden and as embarrassed offers potential to explore a variety of discursively created meanings. Rather than providing an answer to “which one are we supposed to believe”, there is potential for dialogue that will encourage students and teachers to examine their own understanding and consider the ways dominant discourses of shame and secrecy are maintained.

During the discussion above about the representation of the woman in the advert as partially hidden, one of the boys responded “because it’s about the tampons, not about the girl”. One reading of this indicates how the experience of menstruation becomes disconnected from female experience (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Newton, 2012). Menstruation is an inherently female experience as part of her sexual maturation process (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Maluleke, 2004). However, at the same time discourses of secrecy around menstruation require women’s experiences to remain hidden. As Newton (2012) points out menstruation is not a silent topic, the products appear in

colourful boxes on supermarket shelves, there are numerous commercials advertising menstrual products and menstruation, in particular PMS, is often the punchline of many jokes. However, the silence becomes imposed when we move from the abstract to the personal. Menstruation may be visible, but the menstruating woman must always be hidden. Advertisers of menstrual products often use idealised representations of women or no women at all to create a distance from the corporal nature of the menstruating woman. By removing any connection to the experience of menstruation the public acknowledgement of menstruation maintains its secrecy (Erchull, 2013). Discourses of puberty and sexuality discursively construct the female body as 'other', as polluted and problematic. Therefore the boy's statement above about it not being "about the girl" may indicate an awareness of the discourses that work to remove women from the acknowledgement of menstruation.

In response to the boy's comment of the advert not being "about the girl", one of the female students replied "but girls have periods, so it is about them". This rebuttal provides a moment of agency as it directly challenges the discourse of secrecy. The girl's comment was not a grand display nor did it appear to bring about any profound change. Indeed in the noted exchange it was not commented on directly. However, from a post structural view, agency is not about producing these events of grand change (Davies & Gannon, 2005). Poststructural agency becomes about the questioning of assumptions of "truth" that discourses construct, as the girl does with her response to the advert not being "about the girl" (Davies, 2000; St. Pierre, 2000). Dominant discourses of shame and secrecy construct a belief that the experience of menstruation should remain hidden and disconnected from the constitution of femininity (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Kane, 1990). The discourse of secrecy that produces the belief that menstruation should be hidden is so strong that no woman must be seen as connected

to menstruation in anyway (Diorio & Munro, 2000). Indeed, we can see the power of the discourses of shame and secrecy in this advertisement. Even while the text is interpreted originally as promoting a belief that tampons are not embarrassing, the students still (re)produce the discourse that menstruation is shameful. This is their reason why the woman is only partially visible “maybe the girl is too embarrassed to be in the full picture”. With the discursive constructions that imply women should avoid any connection to menstruation and keep it well hidden (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Jackson & Cram, 2003), the girl claiming “girls have periods, so it is about them” was able to momentarily challenge this discourse. As a girl she connected herself and other girls to menstruation. This momentary step outside of the dominant construction of secrecy opened space for alternative discourse that acknowledged the experience of menstruation.

The questioning nature of a critical literacy inquiry also offers potential to make visible the often contradictory and multiple discourses found in texts. While the common reading of the advertisement appears to promote an accepting attitude towards menstruation, and a challenging of constructions of secrecy and shame, it should be noted that the advertisement does not directly challenge traditional discourse. This particular advertisement presents dominant discourses about shame and secrecy as part of the text. In (re)producing the dominant discourse in this way the advertisement reinforces the construction that the shame and embarrassment connected with menstruation should be considered as a normal and expected reaction. Advertising will often present the discourses of shame and secrecy that requires women to hide and distance themselves from all aspects of their menstrual cycle, then provide a product that they claim to be discreet and invisible thus enabling the woman to maintain this regulation of secrecy (Block Coutts & Berg, 1993). The by-line of “break the Cycle”

allows for multiple readings of the text. As the two students' responses show, the text can be seen as both complying with discursive regulations insisting on menstruation remaining hidden as well as an alternative discourse that suggests menstruation no longer needs to be embarrassing. In recognising both discourses students create the opportunity to discuss the construction of menstrual stigma within the advertisement itself.

The product campaign line "Break the Cycle" encourages a reading of the text that indicates a removal of stigma. This reading appears to be taken up by a large majority of the students in the beginning of the observed lesson when they stated the advertisement was saying not to be embarrassed about menstruation, or worried about being seen with tampons. However, as the teacher engaged her students in a dialogue on the construction of the text, the original reading of the advertisement began to be questioned. Students offered opinions of the way the woman in the advert was presented that indicated the text was showing menstruation was embarrassing. Maintaining the power and dominance of discourses of shame and secrecy often requires them to remain hidden and unquestioned (Kenway et al., 1994). During the dialogue with the teacher, two students were able to engage agentic moments that made the (re)production of discourses of shame and secrecy visible. In pointing out that the representation of the woman in the advertisement contributes to constructing her as embarrassed and hiding, the students were able to make the contraction visible and in turn question what discursive message the advertisement was promoting. As one girl questions "Yeah it's telling us both things. It is embarrassing. Don't be embarrassed. Which one are we supposed to believe?"

### **Potential for discursive shifts**

As indicated, students within the classroom lessons were able to challenge discourses of shame and secrecy. During Lisa's classroom lesson's activity, students moved around the room, answering a set question about two different advertisements. One of the adverts showed a women's hand holding a clear plastic handbag, full of an assortment of products, for example, a comb, wallet, sunglasses, and a box of tampons. The writing stated "If I had something to hide, I'd carry a safe". When asked what they thought the advert was about, students wrote opinions onto the provided activity sheets about not being embarrassed to be seen with menstrual products.

She is not afraid to hide her pads. She does not need to hide anything.

She doesn't need to hide anything because she's not the only one that needs them.

(Classroom observation, activity sheets)

The examples above can be seen as indicting a shift in the discursive construction of menstruation being shameful. The students appear to reject this established discourse, constructing menstruation as a normal and natural occurrence without the contributing discourse of shame.

All the observed students were able to recognise the reading that menstruation should not be embarrassing presented in the chosen advertisements. However, it could be a result of how dominantly the discourses of shame and secrecy has become embedded into our construction of menstruation. Presenting and recognising a challenge to the dominant discourse requires a familiarity and understanding of the discourse. Identifying the meaning of the advertisement text as not needing to hide or be embarrassed does not necessarily mean the students are taking up the alternative discourse for themselves. One group's response to what the ad was about stated:

She is not afraid of hiding her pads and tampons. She feels coenfterbul [sic] [comfortable]. Maybe a little too much.

(Classroom observation, activity sheets)

This response was reported as the collective answer of the three girls working together. It may be that this answer came from just one girl, however it was accepted as the answer they wished to put on the activity sheet, therefore I argue that the students of this group, still in some ways conformed with the discursive regulations for a need of secrecy. They recognised the woman in the advertisement as challenging this discourse, and the advertisement presenting an alternative construction, but they also appear to be resistant to this alternative construction. In saying 'maybe a little too much' they draw upon the dominant discourse of secrecy that implies damage to reputation and acceptable feminine subjectivity when not complied with (Allen et al., 2011; Schooler et al., 2005). The students who gave this response appear to maintain the power of this dominant discourse. They can give an answer that provides a different construction of menstruation but they still appear to take up that not hiding menstruation constructs women in negative ways and therefore should be avoided.

All the participating students provided answers during the question sheet activity that appeared to take up discourses that challenged secrecy and shame, even if like the previously mentioned group, they clarified their answers. This could present a shift in the discursive construction of menstruation, however it could also be read as the compliance to acceptable or 'good' student subject position. Within a traditional pedagogy, students are expected to provide the 'right' answer or offer 'sensible' opinions (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). The teachers all discussed with me a need to "...get all the silliness out of the way first" (Lisa, Teacher Interview). For Lisa, this meant dealing with students being "quite silly and immature to start with, there's a lot of giggling and



saying silly things [about sex and their bodies]" (Lisa, Teacher Interview), Tina on the other hand, felt the scheduling of puberty and sexuality education later in the school year, helped diffuse some of the children's uncomfortable reactions. "I would say the classroom atmosphere was already there. I think it confirms respect for other genders and other people, that it's not something to be laughed at" (Tina, Teacher Interview).

The students also take up the discursive rules of what makes a good student. As part of the group interviews, the students were asked their opinions on how they would teach menstruation, what parts they would change, and how they would approach the topic, the presence of laughter and making it fun seemed a common theme of the group.

Haza: We aren't allowed to laugh.

Clarence: Yes, [the teacher] doesn't like us laughing.

Donny: Like let us laugh at it instead of telling us not to.

Researcher: Are there things that are quite funny that you'd like to laugh about?

Haza: Yes, and we'd want to go to it more than not go to it.

Donny: If the teacher thinks it's a fun way to learn.

Researcher: Hmm?

Donny: If it's fun to learn, then we have fun. If not, then we're all serious and not laughing.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson Interview)

In constructing menstruation as a sensitive topic, the discourses of shame and secrecy contribute to a belief that menstruation is embarrassing to talk about, and the classroom discussions are prone to include peer ridicule (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Lees, 1994).

Expressing concerns that, like Tina indicated above, the classroom needs be respectful and there be no laughter, may actually create or reinforce notions that there is something different, and potentially embarrassing about the topic. The students above appear to want to “laugh at it” and to consider learning about the topic in ways that make them “want to go to it”. When we consider how dominant discourses of shame and secrecy create the idea that people are reluctant to discuss menstruation. Donny and Haza can be seen as disrupting this discourse. They want to learn, to engage with the topic and have fun with it. However, Donny appears to think this can only happen “if the teacher thinks it’s a fun way to learn”. Donny may have a different idea of ‘fun’ than his teacher, but I also believe, within the context of the menstruation lesson, both Donny and Haza, are moving away from the dominant discourses that silence discussion of menstruation and make it an uncomfortable topic.

In a continuation of this conversation about how learning menstruation in fun and interesting ways, Haza shared an experience of watching menstruation adverts on youtube.com:

Haza: She’d found one of those American adverts and we watched them. They were so funny that we were laughing so hard. We were literally on the ground rolling around laughing. Actually they were so funny. But they gave like a lot of information. It actually told us lots of things. But then in class, we aren’t allowed to laugh. [The teacher] will say no laughing, be sensible. So we don’t really learn a lot. Well we do, but it’s only the stuff she wants us to know.

(Lucy’s Class, Pre-lesson Interview)

As discussed in chapter three’s literature review, researchers who have looked at the content of advertisements challenge the notion they are providing any real substantive

knowledge or information, but instead perpetuate and reinforce many of the dominant discourses, especially involving constructs of secrecy and shame (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Mazzarella, 2008). However, Haza appears to believe the advertisements offer a wider source of knowledge than available within the classroom. Haza appears to think that in creating “sensible” lessons where laughter is discouraged, there is less information shared. “We don’t really learn a lot”. If the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy remain unquestioned, how teachers construct their own puberty lessons will be influenced by them. Ideas of fun and celebration may not be present as they appear unrealistic or unattainable. For Haza, exploring other sources of information offers her a wide range to build her understandings. With the online advertisements offering her fun and laughter, and viewed with her friend, I would also argue the potential for connection and comradery, as it was *they* who were “literally on the ground rolling around laughing”. Haza’s experience offered her new opportunities for understandings that were not based in a need to be sensible and cautious about laughter as was her view of the classroom lesson. Therefore the opening of other discourses than shame and secrecy also opens up new learning.

However, expressions of shame seemed absent from the students’ construction of menstruation. As reported, the students in this research all appeared to easily reject the belief that women should feel shame in connection to their periods. Students countered a discourse of shame by positioning menstruation as a natural and mundane event. Comments on activity sheets included:

Don’t be ashamed of seeing your pads/tampons.

She’s not the only one, it happens to everyone.

This ad is about embracing[sic] yourself because every other girl will soon or is doing the same thing now. Don’t worry what other people thinks[sic].

These responses within the observed classroom lesson could indicate the students are taking up alternative discourses to the dominant construction of menstruation as a shameful secret. The idea of menstruation, especially in the selling of menstrual products is acceptable. However, once menstruation becomes a personal lived experience, menstruation, and the menstruating woman must remain invisible (Newton, 2012; Thornton, 2013). Discursive regulations instructed women they should hide any indication, in appearance or behaviour, that menstruation was occurring. Non-compliance to these regulations was seen as a failing of acceptable femininity and could risk social and cultural condemnation and exclusion. Menstruation is something that must never be acknowledged as happening (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Koff & Rierdan, 1995). However, the students' responses during the lesson activities seem to disrupt these constructions by openly connecting themselves and other females as menstruating. With regular comments like "don't be ashamed" and "it happens to everyone", the students in the lesson acknowledge the existence and normalcy of menstruating women, rather than take up discourses of shame that are meant to cloak them in secrecy.

This acknowledgement that the young school aged women who participated in my study were able to visibilise themselves and their peers as people who menstruated also occurred within the student interviews. During the interviews with the students, the girls would regularly use personal pronouns that connected them to the experience of menstruation. Rather than respond to the questions in abstract ways that would create distance, the female students would offer personal first-hand experience:

Rebekah:           Just that it's all right. Yeah. Everyone gets it and I'm not just one.

(Tina's Class, Post-lesson interview)

Haza: My friend. We talk about it all the time. Watch stuff and laugh. Or just talk.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson interview)

Cher: [UbyKotex] make both. I've gotten both from the supermarket.

(Lisa's Class, Post-lesson interview)

This could be read as the female students taking up an acknowledging or even celebratory position as menstruating or potentially menstruating women. Fingerson (2006) found the girls she spoke with often saw menstruation as creating membership to an exclusive group. So rather than a sense of shame and secrecy, menstruation gave girls special knowledge and a sense of belonging. With their comments of “everyone gets it” and “we talk about it all the time”, Rebekah and Haza contribute to discourses that indicate a type of female status and/or acceptance of menstruation. However, the apparent disruption of the discourses of shame and secrecy may be more an indication of the ways the students positioned themselves within the lesson and the construction of menstruation. The interviews with the students directed the conversation away from personal experiences with menstruation and into areas of how and what they learn about the subject. This may create a space where students, both male and female, were able to talk about the ideas around the construction of menstruation without having to directly challenge the discourses that require secrecy.

Creating lessons that encourage students to discuss menstruation not only opens up the possibility of other constructions by providing opportunities to challenge dominant constructions. During the pre-lesson group interview, I asked the students what parts of the previous lessons they enjoyed, and what they thought would make a good puberty

lesson. One group of students reported that being able to do experiments with menstrual products made the lesson engaging:

- Researcher: The school I went to a couple of years ago, they sat around in a group and passed materials around like tampons and stuff. Did you do that? Did you get to touch the products?
- Kathy: No.
- Quinten: Yes we did, last...
- Kathy: Oh yeah, that was really fun.
- Researcher: Oh?
- Kathy: We got to do experiments. See how they worked.
- Quinten: She put a tampon in a cup of water.
- Clarence: That was really cool.
- Quinten: It makes it more fun and we got to see what it was made of and what happens.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson interview)

In making students do 'experiments' the teacher appears to have created an alternative construction of menstruation management. During my 2012 Masters research, with mixed gendered students of the same age, I observed an extreme reluctance for students to touch even the wrapped menstrual products (Agnew, 2012). The reaction of the students from my previous research may represent the ways we construct menstruation, and therefore menstrual products as unclean and potentially contaminating (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Fingerson, 2006; Merskin, 1999). It also shows that being seen with visible indicators of menstruation often carries discourse of shame and embarrassment (Allen et al., 2011; Schooler et al., 2005; Stubbs, 2008). However,

the enjoyment of the experiments indicated by the students above, may be related to a distancing from the experience of menstruation. By creating experiments to explore the products, menstruation, and women's personal experiences, may be removed from the discussion (Docherty, 2010; Erchull, 2013). In this way, the secrecy around menstruation is maintained. Even though strongly dominant, the discourses that construct menstruation as unclean and shameful are not immutable (St. Pierre, 2000). All three students, Kathy, Quinten and Clarence, report enjoying the lesson and wanting to know how tampons worked. Dominant discourses of shame and secrecy create a belief that being seen with a tampon lowers the perceived competence and likability of a woman (Schooler et al., 2005). Therefore, the enjoyment of the reported lesson "it makes it more fun and we got to see what it was made of and what happens" indicates an engagement with menstruation in alternative ways that challenge traditionally dominant discourses.

While the majority of the research (e.g. Chrisler, 2013; Chrisler et al., 2015; Erchull, 2013; Newton, 2012; Thornton, 2013), including my own previous Master's study (Agnew, 2012) still indicates discourses of shame work to constitute menstruation, I found an apparent shift in the ways students negotiated the discourse of menstruation. Students' comments, as reported in this chapter, including Rebekah's comment, "everyone gets it", and Haza commenting that her friend and her "talk about it all the time", indicate an acceptance of the normalcy and openness of being a menstruating woman. Likewise, during the classroom activity, all the students, of both genders, took up readings that indicated menstruation was "nothing to be ashamed about". However, the discourses of awkwardness and embarrassment still appear to be taken up as part of the construction of menstruation and puberty by the students. Before the lesson,

students from one class indicated that they might feel embarrassed about learning about menstruation and puberty amongst their friends and peers.

Researcher: Why is it embarrassing then?

Kathy: All the diagrams and that sort of stuff because kids are looking.

Haza: You see everything.

Kathy: Well not everything. It's just awkward.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson interview)

Donny: Yeah, but we don't like to talk about it because we're with our peers. The people around us might laugh.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson interview)

This acceptance of puberty as an awkward and embarrassing time in a young person's life remains a dominant discourse. We, as a society expect young people to not want to discuss or be open about puberty (Allen et al., 2011; Kissling, 1996b). Therefore, our discussions with young people either within families or in the classroom lessons often, through language and attitude reinforce the discursive construction that puberty must be kept a shameful secret.

However, in the interviews with the students, many also challenged these dominant discourses of shame and secrecy. For example, during a discussion about previous year's learning about puberty one of the students regretted not being there for the class, expressing a desire to learn more about the topic.

Cher: I was in Australia when we did puberty [last year]. It's not fair.



- Researcher: Not fair?
- Cher: I wanted to learn about it with everyone. I missed out. It is a wee bit awkward but I wanted to know.
- Bobbie-Jo: It was awkward but it was not school work.
- Researcher: No school work? What do you mean?
- Cher: Well it's sort of.
- Bobbie-Jo: But not like maths or reading or anything. It's just like talking, although it was really awkward, it was stuff that was important, interesting.

(Lisa's Class, Post-lesson interview)

While both Cher and Bobbie-Jo do construct talking about menstruation as “a wee bit awkward”, they both appear to challenge discourses of shame and secrecy by constructing menstruation as “important, interesting”. Traditionally, discourses of shame and secrecy contribute to menstruation being a topic that is approached with reluctance or avoided all together (Allen et al., 2011; Koff & Rierdan, 1995; McKeever, 1984). However, Cher's lament that it was “not fair” that she missed out on the previous year's lesson, as she “wanted to learn about it with everyone” shows an interest and eagerness to learn that disrupts the discourse that people, especially young people, want to avoid discussing menstruation. Also, as discussed in the previous chapter, Cher may be drawing on discourses that construct having information about menstruation as “special knowledge”. Having knowledge, girls over boys, older children over younger friends and siblings, may be seen as powerful and providing membership to an exclusive group rather than something shameful and embarrassing (Fingerson, 2006; Newton, 2012). Therefore Cher may consider not participating in the lesson as being a disadvantage.

While not framed as at the same school work as other subjects, for example, maths and reading, menstruation was something they “wanted to know” and saw as important. The girls desire to learn is a challenge to the construction of puberty and sexuality education that positions students as reluctant (Chrisler, 2013; Fingerson, 2006). The idea that learning about menstruation is ‘sensitive’ and ‘delicate’ due to a need for secrecy and to avoid embarrassment does not appear to be a concern for Cher and Bobbie-Jo. In constructing the lesson as ‘just like talking” Bobbie-Jo resists the discourse that there needs to be any special consideration different from other school work. Indeed her statement “it was not school work... it’s just like talking... it was stuff that was important, interesting” could indicate that instead of being sensitive and difficult, she actually saw it as more enjoyable and valuable than her regular school topics. This along, with the ways discourses were taken up and resisted during the classroom lessons, as shown previously, may indicate an increasing move to discursively construct menstruation in new alternative ways that resist the discourses of shame and secrecy.

The students within the classroom lessons and the group discussions appear to willingly disrupt the discourses around shame and secrecy. They spoke openly about their interests in learning about the topic and appear willing to associate themselves with the identification of, at least, a potentially menstruating woman. Cher’s comment earlier about knowing products because “I’ve gotten both from the supermarket” (Lisa’s Class, Post-lesson interview) may be read as an acknowledgement of her menstrual status. She positions herself as someone who buys menstrual products and therefore makes the abstract idea of menstruation personal. This appears to challenge the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy that assert a need to keep menstruation hidden and distanced from the personal. The participants that appear to take up discourses constructing menstruation as something interesting and favourable, alongside the

observed classroom lessons that constructed menstruation as normal and acceptably visible, could indicate a move towards a new dominant discursive construction of menstruation. This alternative to the currently dominant construction of shame and secrecy may result in young people becoming more confident and comfortable with the social and biological aspects of menstruation. As one of the students commented in response to the idea that menstruation was thought of as shameful, “that’s just silly, we’re all going to get it” (Haza, Lucy’s Class, Pre-lesson interview).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I reported on how dominant discourses of shame and secrecy affect our understandings of menstruation on both a conscious and unconscious level. Teachers are not exempt from these constructions and may first need to become aware of them themselves so to understand how the discourses work in creating and maintaining a particular meaning of menstruation as secret and shameful. The workshops with teachers allow for an opportunity to explore their own understandings through critical literacy, therefore making visible the discursive constructions, both personally and in turn within their classroom teaching. With an example from a classroom lesson, I was able to show that a critical literacy approach may be able to make visible the ways these discourses work and therefore open up moments of challenge. With data gathered from classroom field notes, recorded lesson activity sheets and students interviews I posited a challenge to these dominant discourses occurring in young people. While the young people involved in this research still often constructed puberty education and menstruation specifically, as awkward and potentially embarrassing, they also appeared to challenge the idea that it was shameful and something to be secretive about. Students appeared to engage with discourse constructing menstruation as interesting and even possibly fun to learn about.

As this chapter, and the previous chapter on power, shows critical literacy provides potential for students and teachers to become more aware of how their understandings of menstruation are constructed and maintained. The critical literacy approach enables students, and their teachers, to ask questions about the way we construct our understandings that examines often previously unnoticed and unquestioned beliefs and meanings. Key to this analysis is the use of dialogue within the lesson that encourages participants to explore and question. This concept of dialogue and its importance in promoting agency and expanding our understanding of the way discourses work to construct meaning will be explored in more detail in the next chapter.

## **Chapter Seven: Dialogue in Critical Literacy - Engaging in Collaborative Menstruation Learning**

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### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I discussed how the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy impact how we understand menstruation. The dominance of these discourses often make it impossible to consider menstruation in alternative ways. Teachers are not exempt from this discursive construction of menstruation as shameful and secret, and this may have an effect on the ways they present menstruation during the lesson. However, during the observed critical literacy lessons the students were able to see the ways this discourse was used to construct menstruation in menstrual product advertising and engage in ways that disrupted the dominant discourses. This disruption of menstruation as an embarrassing subject that students were reluctant to participate in was also challenged by the students during the interviews as they talked about being interested and excited to learn. Critical literacy can be a pedagogy approach that supports and encourages a shift away from the discursive construction of menstruation as shameful and secret.

This thesis explores the impact of critical literacy on the ways we build understandings about menstruation. During this exploration of the use of a critical literacy approach, I noted the significant impact critical literacy dialogue had on teaching and learning. In this chapter, I will look specifically at dialogue from a critical literacy framework and how it can be used to promote engagement and investigation into the discursive construction of menstruation. Critical literacy dialogue encourages students and teachers to work together in a problem-solving approach to learning (Norton, 2011; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011; Souto-Manning, 2009). While traditional classroom discussion often focuses on the (re)production and reinforcement of predetermined information, critical

literacy dialogue engages with the possibility of multiple meanings (Freire, 1996; Norton, 2011; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). Students' reading of texts, of the information presented in the lesson, can become the initiation point from which both students and teachers pursue and develop deeper understanding of the topic.

As an overview to this chapter, I start with *Critical literacy dialogue: authentic questions*. The section explores the role authentic questions have in developing a critical literacy dialogue. In asking authentic questions, the teacher is seeking to engage with his/her students to build knowledge. These questions are about the teacher wishing to discover information that he/she does not already know and allow the students to explore their own ideas. In *Dialogue in a sensitive topic*, I show how giving the students the opportunity to develop a critical literacy dialogue, it can develop deeper and broader understanding of menstruation and are able to look critically at the information presented. *Learning beyond the 'right answer'* uses an example from an observed lesson, where the teacher shifted the discussion from finding the 'right' answer, to discussing with the students' difficulties with the question. In this section, I show how allowing the students to not have an answer developed a broader understanding of menstruation. Critical literacy dialogue also asks teachers to, at least momentarily, relinquish power and 'vacate the floor' (Edwards-Groves, Anstey, & Bull, 2013). Finally, in *Student as teacher*, I use a short observed classroom discussion to show how not only vacating the floor, but also allowing the student to take the role of teacher and the teacher acknowledging her experience of learning from her student can also open up the opportunity to explore new knowledge and reinforce the student's potential to take up alternative discourses that come from multiple readings.

### **Critical literacy dialogue: authentic questions.**

During this research into the impact a critical literacy approach would have on the teaching and learning of menstruation, it became clear that dialogue played an important factor. Critical literacy dialogue involves students and teachers engaging in an exchange of ideas and opinions as they mutually build a shared knowledge (Sandretto, 2016). This use of critical literacy dialogue steps away from a traditional classroom practice of Initiate-Response-Evaluate or IRE dialogue. Traditionally, classroom dialogue followed an established pattern. The teacher would initiate the dialogue with a question she/he already knew the answer to (Sandretto, 2016; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). For instance, when creating a lesson activity, the teacher may have a plan for the direction the activity will take. This appears to be the case when Lucy, one of the teacher participants, introduced an advert to be discussed. During the interview she discussed having to deal with a group of students who struggled with understanding the advertisement they were given, and how that changed the approach she had to take with that one group

Lucy: I had assumed they would understand [the advert] so it surprised me.  
I didn't get the answers I was expecting.

(Teacher Interview)

When an initial question is asked with the expectation of a specific answer, the following dialogue will likely become highly scripted. The IRE dialogue focuses on the transmission of knowledge following what Freire (1996) calls a banking method of education. As discussed in chapter two's theoretical framework, the banking method relies on the teacher giving their knowledge to the student so the students can reproduce it. Therefore, the purpose of IRE dialogue centres on the reinforcement and reproduction of an established knowledge (Freire, 1996; Sandretto, 2016). This approach may prove strategically useful in reviewing content or providing specific information (Sandretto, 2016). However, the imparting of knowledge onto the student is not seen to promote an

engagement with new ideas and investigations of new knowledge as is the aim of teaching menstruation with a critical literacy pedagogy (Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Sandretto, 2016).

The image which often comes to mind in relation to IRE dialogue involves the teacher repeatedly asking the same question to a disinterested class of students. In her book, *Planting seeds: Embedding critical literacy into your classroom programme*, Sandretto with Klenner (2011) uses a well-known scene from the movie *Ferris Bueller's day off* (Hughes, 1986) where the classroom teacher repeatedly asks questions to his nonresponsive students to illustrate the perception of IRE as ineffectual and as a reflection of a lack of interest and engagement. While these types of representations are meant to be comical rather than a direct depiction of classroom dialogue, there still appears to be a reliance in current day practice on traditional IRE forms of classroom discussion (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). In discussing the difficulty of getting students to express opinions rather than give a 'right answer', Lisa noted that this may also related to the ways teachers still engage with the IRE types of discussions:

Lisa:                    Yeah. Or something that we maybe as teachers aren't so used to. Do you know what I mean? Because you often ask for an answer, not their opinion. It's not that you don't care. It's just something, do they know the answer, yes, great, now move on.

(Teacher Interview)

With this comment, Lisa appears to take up the traditional idea of education involving a banking method of knowledge transmission. In this method any dialogue between teacher and student is done primarily for assessment purposes. The teaching, as well as the learning, is assessed. Lisa's comment "do they know the answer, yes, great, now move on" could indicate an assessment of her ability to transmit the knowledge as much



as the student's ability to receive it. Therefore dialogue within this banking method of education may be seen as a quick, effective tool to assess the success of the teaching and learning.

Questions of discovery, or what Sandretto (2016) calls authentic questions, involve the teacher asking questions he/she does not already know the answer to. Unlike the IRE dialogue where the response is often dictated by the initiating question, within critical literacy dialogue, the questions look to discover and investigate new ideas. During the exit interview, the critical literacy questions given as a resource were discussed as being immensely helpful in creating an engaging classroom environment.

Tina: It was a huge help actually with the grouping of the question that you did for us. That was a massive help. That's what I used to try and help the kids create more dialogue. As a teacher you try and use open questions but sometimes no matter what, nothing. And I just want these kids to talk. I'll continue to use those [questions]. That was something that stuck out as really working.

(Teacher interview)

These questions, for example 'what is the text about and how do we know' [also see Appendix D] seek to explore the students' opinions and ideas with the potential for a variety of understanding. The questions used by teachers in this research provided initiation points for discussions. Rather than ending with an expected or hoped for answer, the authentic question seeks to be the beginning point of a developing dialogue (Edwards-Groves et al., 2013; Hodgen & Webb, 2008; Sandretto, 2016). As Tina states above, they work to "help the kids create more dialogue" or put more bluntly she "just wants these kids to talk". While Tina's comment indicates that sometimes students appear reluctant and teachers have to work to get students to engage in classroom

discussions, students themselves report a desire to participate. In a discussion with one group of students on how to improve lessons on puberty, an idea was suggested to make them more interactive.

Researcher: Interactive? As in doing things?

Donny: Yeah, but as well as being able to talk more. Instead of the teacher telling us, like it's so boring.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson Interview)

This could be seen as an indication that the students wish to engage in dialogues with other students as well as with their teachers. However, it is also possible that Donny may be suggesting the way his teacher is presenting the information turns him off from learning because "like it's so boring". Like Donny's statement about being able "to talk more", another group of students, when asked about what made the lesson work for them, discussed how their teacher not telling them what she thought helped to promote their participation in the dialogue.

Doug: How she wasn't going to tell us, teach us because she might have a different opinion to us.

Researcher: Teach you?

Doug: She said she wasn't just wanting to teach us what she thought. She wanted us to tell her what we thought.

(Tina's Class, Post-lesson Interview)

Both Doug's and Donny's comments could indicate students have a strong desire to participate in authentic classroom discussions. Donny's suggestion that being able to "talk more, instead of the teacher just telling us" would create a better education environment could be seen as borne out by Doug's review of his class experience. For

Doug, having his teacher not “teach them, what she thought “encouraged him to share his own opinions that might be different than his teacher’s.

Doug’s report that his teacher “wanted us to tell her what we thought” also points to another important aspect within critical literacy dialogue, the potential for multiple answers. When asking an authentic question, the teacher seeks an answer she or he does not already know. Therefore there is no pre-established ‘correct answer (Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). The teacher’s question does not seek a correct answer as an endpoint, but rather promotes the idea that each question and answer may provide the starting point for a developing conversation. If the potential for conversation directs the classroom dialogue, no answer is dismissed as incorrect. Instead a variety of answers can be seen as progressing the discussion and contributing to the growing knowledge (Sandretto, 2016; Souto-Manning, 2009). If, as with poststructuralism, there are multiple constructions of knowledge and meaning that shift in dominance and visibility, these multiple answers offer a way to explore how we understand our worlds, and why certain meanings may be more readily available (St. Pierre, 2000). While some responses can be off-topic, others, at first dismissed, may offer opportunities to explore new understandings. For example, as discussed in the previous chapter on shame and secrecy, instead of dismissing celebration of menstruation as unrealistic that response could offer a starting point to new understandings.

However, although both Doug and Donny reported enjoying being able to offer their own opinions rather than reproducing what their teachers expected, some students expressed concerns about engaging in critical literacy dialogue. In the post-lesson group interview, students from Lucy’s class discussed negative aspects of the lesson, including feeling pressured to answer multiple questions.

Quinten: But even when she was talking, if you put your hand up to say something she'd ask why why why?

Clarence: She just would follow up question after question.

Isadora: Question after question.

Quinten: You felt a little bit pressured.

(Lucy's Class, Post-lesson Interview)

While critical literacy dialogue attempts to encourage students to engage with a topic rather than reproduce established answers, this process may result in students feeling exposed or "a little pressured". Scaffolding may be needed in the skills of critical literacy dialogue, but may also be helpful in developing an environment where students can feel more comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions. Traditional classroom dialogue and the dominant 'banking' pedagogy (re)created and reinforced within the expected classroom environment does not often promote students to take the lead and present new ideas for exploration. Suddenly confronted with the expectation to engage with a critical literacy dialogue without previous experience or an understanding of the skills involved may create the feeling of being 'pressured' and a risk of not wanting to participate. When discussing what they did not like about the lesson a couple of the boys talked about their reluctance to share their activity sheet answers, or elaborate on their opinions. The students in Lucy's class were asked to stand in their groups and share their activity sheet answers. Their teacher would also ask questions about why they choose their specific answer rather than just giving an affirmative or negative response:

Quinten: I was like being pressured to answer the questions.

Clarence: It was embarrassing going out the front.

Haza: You guys didn't even do anything!

Quinten: I talked more where it's hard to see me and not much people.

Clarence: No spotlight with everyone staring.

(Lucy's Class, Post-lesson Interview)

Critical literacy often involves challenging dominant discourses and creating social activism (Norton, 2011; Powell et al., 2001). And whilst this activism may be as simple as critically challenging media representations, students may need scaffolding not just in the academic skills, but also in the emotional ones that critical literacy may bring. Engaging with critical literacy dialogue often means teachers and students discussing and investigating topics that are positioned as difficult and/or sensitive. While I posit that critical literacy dialogue is a powerful tool to engage with these topics, in this case of menstruation, the (re)production of discourses of silence and positioning topics as sensitive along with the dominant constructions of the pedagogy of the school may present obstacles to the critical literacy approach (Norton, 2011). Critical literacy dialogue provides opportunities to redefine the classroom learning environment, however, students and teachers may need development and support implementing and taking up the tools of critical literacy dialogue into their teaching and learning (Norton, 2011; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

If we see education being about building and expanding knowledge, critical literacy dialogue embraces the idea of multiple readings. Multiple readings supply teachers and students with opportunities to explore and develop a variety of understandings. Indeed, accepting that there can be multiple readings and understandings for any text, teachers as well as students are able to position themselves within the text and speak to their own knowledge and constructions (Gilbert, 2001). With Doug's teacher explicitly telling her students she "wasn't just wanting to teach us what she thought, she wanted us to

tell her what we thought” she was not only opening the possibility of multiple readings ,but also implied a value to those readings. When we teach one reading as “true” or the correct answer, we reinforce the legitimacy of the dominant social construction (Gilbert, 2001). However, but encouraging multiple readings of a text, critical literacy dialogue can allow for participants to position themselves and their own knowledge in a way that constructs that knowledge as valuable. It also allows for the recognition and investigation of how different understandings can be made by different groups (Gilbert, 2001; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

### **Dialogue within a sensitive topic.**

This research hoped to show how engaging with critical literacy dialogue within the classroom lessons on menstruation could promote engagement with different ways of understanding menstruation. The perception of lessons in puberty and sexuality education often depict silent and unresponsive classrooms (Allen, et al., 2011; Diorio & Munro, 2003; Diorio & Munro, 2000). There remains a prevalent belief that students do not wish to participate in puberty and sexuality education discussions. Perhaps influenced by the discourse of secrecy of menstruation as discussed in the previous chapter, the accepted belief that students will be reticent to participate in any discussion flavours many teachers’ approaches to puberty and sexuality education (Buston et al., 2002; Vavrus, 2009). .

The prevalent discourse that students will be unwilling or incapable of classroom discussions about puberty and sexuality education may be connected to society’s construction of the child as innocent (Allen, 2007a; Diorio & Munro, 2000; Monk, 2001). The discourse of the innocent child constructs the child as being completely unaware of

the practicalities and regulations of sexuality. Many educators and parents believe in a need to maintain this innocence stating children are not developmentally capable of understanding sexuality (Curran, Chiarolli, & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2009; Vavrus, 2009). This is despite children exhibiting sexualised talk and play (Vavrus, 2009). The innocent child, is therefore, incapable of participating in any effective education within a comprehensive puberty and sexuality programme (Allen, 2007a; Vavrus, 2009). The idea that students' lack the maturity to allow them to effectively participate in the learning about puberty education can be seen as based on the construction of the child as innocent, needing protection from 'adult' information they would not be able to process. This may be more noticeable within the later sexuality focused lessons of puberty and sexuality education, however, it can also be seen in the teaching of menstruation (Allen, 2007b; Diorio & Munro, 2000). So even as young people enter their own puberty and interact with representations of menstruation, for example menstrual product advertisements, there may still be a perception that they are incapable of engaging in discussions of puberty.

The teachers participating in this research also seemed to take up discourses of the innocent child and the requirement to maintain and protect that innocence. This could be seen in teachers' perceived need to reassure parents and caregivers that no direct or explicit discussions of sex would take place during puberty lessons:

Pennsy: We're a Catholic school, so when we notify our parents that we'll be teaching puberty in the coming term that we assure them certain topics will not be discussed, for example, we are not allowed to talk about masturbation. We give a detailed description of what is covered, and most of the parents are okay with that.

(Teachers' Workshop 3)

Lucy: Because part of the requirements is that you've got to consult with your community so at the start we always have it out there. We have an evening. We've had the parents come along and we'd explain the three programmes, years six, seven and eight to them and answer any questions. Some parents get worried, but over the last four or five years we only end up with maybe two or three people attending out of, gosh, over 100 kids.

(Teacher Interview)

While the reported reactions of parents as being "okay with that" in the case of Pennsy's experience, or the possible lack of interest where only two or three people out of 100 kids showing up as reported by Lucy may actually point to parents and caregivers being more comfortable about their children learning about puberty and sexuality, the detailed notification to parents about this school subject is still positioned as a 'requirement' and an expectation.

Alongside parental concerns and reassurances, the teachers also reported a need to protect the children's innocence within classroom discussions. During a discussion of handling the sensitive issues of puberty education in the interviews, a couple of the teachers reported a belief that their students were expecting discussion about sex when the lessons on puberty started.

Lucy: Actually I found one of the harder things was the kids, usually the boys, that tried to turn the questions around to sex. And you had to find a way to shut that down.

(Teacher Interview)



Lisa: I think probably the hard stuff is if you've got kids that know more. Like they know about the sex side of things and try and direct questions to make you feel uncomfortable when it's something that we as staff don't cover. My standard response now is, "That's not a topic that we cover here. You need to ask your parents at home."

(Teacher Interview)

While Lucy does not give a reason for why she feels a need "to shut that down", Lisa appears to frame questions and discussions about sex as deliberate attempts to make her, the teacher "feel uncomfortable". Both teachers appear to view discussions of sex as inappropriate within their lessons on puberty. It could be argued that sex, even within puberty and sexuality education, still remains a taboo topic. Teachers, who actively seek to encourage classroom participation and discussion, appear to view questions about sex not as valid contributions to the dialogue, but as disruptions that need to be dealt with and 'shut down'.

However, for another teacher questions about sex were not viewed as inappropriate or unacceptable. When discussing working in a topic that is considered sensitive, Tina described how she approached students' questions and comments:

Tina: At the start I outline what we are going to be doing and the expectations. So they don't often ask about sex when we are doing [puberty]. But some have genuine questions about that. If it's an actual question and we can talk about it generally, I don't have a problem with that. I think they are better to be educated. But not everybody is ready for that. But I wouldn't discourage, I won't put them down or discourage them because sometimes people are ready. So sometimes we talk one on one or in their small group. Not in a whole class discussion.

(Teacher Interview)

For Tina, the questions about sex do not seem to represent disruptive student behaviour meant to make the teacher feel “uncomfortable” or a subject that she needs “to find a way to shut that down”. Instead she frames them as “genuine questions”. With understanding that not all her students are ready for the discussion and responding appropriately with “one on one or in their small group”, Tina views any question on sex as a genuine desire to learn and appears to approach them as an opportunity for education and dialogue to occur. With traditional teaching, it is often the teacher that asks questions that direct the learning, however, in this case, Tina sees the students’ questions as an initiation point for potentially significant learning (Sandretto, 2016).

With the perception of puberty and sexuality education as a sensitive topic, initiation points for establishing a dialogue may create apprehension and fear of where the classroom discussion may lead (Buston et al., 2001; Diorio & Munro, 2003; Duffy et al., 2013). Teachers may feel a need to maintain a stricter control over the dialogue to prevent it veering into ‘uncomfortable’ areas. And when asked about their own practices in teaching a topic that was deemed sensitive, the teachers believed themselves equipped to teach puberty and sexuality education they reported their colleagues might struggle.

My area is Health, so it was never [difficult for me], but I’m surprised you got so few responses, other teachers I know, they often talk about being nervous, about how to teach, what they should say. Of course finding time for PD is hard, and the focus is always on other things

(Tina, Teacher Interview)

The feeling of being under-prepared or uncomfortable teaching the topic may influence how willing teachers are in allowing students to initiate dialogue that may invite questions and discussions in areas they find unsettling or uncomfortable.

Alongside this need for protection from information about sex, the discourse of the innocent child also constructs the students as not having the maturity to handle 'adult' topics. As well as the possibility of asking "questions to make you feel uncomfortable," Lisa also reported that her "kids can be quite silly and immature so I always try and establish those ground rules and get the silliness out of the way to start off with." (Lisa, Teacher Interview). The construction of the innocent child reacting with silliness due to their immaturity in relation to the topic often gets presented as an obstacle teachers must overcome to get students to participate (Curran et al., 2009; Thorne, 2004). When talking about classroom management and possibly disruptive behaviour, one teacher explained her response to students 'silliness':

Lucy: Usually I will ignore it and carry on, unless it becomes obvious that they're interrupting the whole class... it's hard enough getting them to talk about it, without constantly stopping to deal with the nonsense.

(Teacher Interview)

While the 'silliness' appears expected and the teachers plan management strategies to deal with the disruptions, discussions with the teachers during the workshops and interviews indicate there were few actual disruptions in their experience of teaching classroom lessons on puberty over the years as the students appeared either quiet or interested in the topic. As Lisa reported:

Lisa: Often the kids you might think of as being a problem end up being really quiet and well behaved. And many are actually really keen and

want to learn. They will say they are not looking forward to it but then they actually do. It's quite interesting.

(Teachers' Workshop 2)

This recognition of student engagement in the topic appears to contradict the teachers' positioning of their students as unengaged or too immature to participate. Even with many years of teaching puberty lessons that showed students to not be disruptive or disengaged, there is still a belief that there needs to be special management planning because "kids can be a bit silly". This may indicate the strength of the discourse that constructs students as embarrassed and incapable of engaging in conversations about puberty and sexuality education.

The students whom participated in this research also discussed a strong interest in learning about menstruation and the other changes puberty brings. As reported in the shame and secrecy chapter, students found it important to learn about menstruation and as with the case of Cher "I was in Australia when we did puberty [last year]. It's not fair... I wanted to learn about it with everyone. I missed out." (Lisa's Class, Post-lesson interview). Cher was disappointed when she missed one of the classes on puberty. Therefore, I claim that the discursive construction of students as uninterested or immature fails to represent a full picture of young people's experiences with puberty and sexuality education. This is not to say students do not acknowledge that there are times when they may laugh and be silly.

During an interview with one of the student groups, we discussed how laughter was often seen as unacceptable, even though they framed the laughter as a tool to navigate the sensitive and challenging topic:

Researcher: So you actually get in trouble for laughing when you learnt about puberty?

Clarence: Yeah.

Donny: It was hard because it was like our first lesson ever and we got the laughs and we couldn't stop laughing because she wouldn't let us laugh.

Kathy: It's kind of like, if you're allowed to giggle a bit that should be all right.

Donny: But not like throughout each lesson.

Researcher: So it actually helps to learn if you can be silly occasionally.

Clarence: Not all the time.

Donny: But no one's laughing all the time. Sometimes you laugh with your friend. Sometimes you can go serious.

Haza: Sometimes the only way to say it is say it silly.

Researcher: What do you mean?

Haza: It's awkward and hard sometimes you say it silly, like you're laughing, joking. But it can be important, you know, and that's the only how you say it. Because you don't know how other ways. It's all new and awkward and you don't know the how of how to say it.

(Lucy's Class, Pre-lesson Interview)

While the students acknowledge their laughter was often reactionary to the topic being "hard and "awkward", it would also appear to be a reaction they found useful. Laughter appears to be something helpful or natural. Donny sees it as a normal reaction to the newness of "it was like our first lesson ever" and likewise Kathy believes that they should be "allowed to giggle a bit". The teachers in this research often worked from a dominant

pedagogy that points to a need to manage the laughter and silliness as off-task needing to be shut down, ignored or redirected (Curran et al., 2009; Diorio & Munro, 2003; Vavrus, 2009). However, the students appear to self-monitor their own behaving noting “no one’s laughing all the time” and it would not continue “throughout each lesson”. But it also appears the laughing and joking, other than just being reactionary, serves another purpose. Rather than dismissing the laughter as getting “all silly” or something that has to be managed, these moments of laughter can provide initiation points to build dialogue from

For Haza the laughing and joking appears to be part of her initial navigation of the topic. “Sometimes the only way to say it is to say it silly”, it could appear that what is being said is ‘Laughing and being silly’ but for Haza this is part of her process of engaging with a new topic she is unfamiliar with. “But it can be important, you know and that’s the only how of you can say it”. Puberty, and in this case menstruation, present a new and complex topic within their classroom education and students may have not many opportunities for conversations outside of the classroom setting (Allen, et al., 2011; Kissling, 1996a). Therefore students like Haza might struggle with communicating their ideas and questions in ways other than those labelled as silliness. “Because you don’t know how other ways, it’s all new and awkward, you don’t know the how of how to say it”. Therefore the ‘silliness’ may present students attempts to engage with and make sense of the new material.

During a conversation about there being no wrong or right answers with students, Doug also connects with the idea that answers given by students may sound silly. Doug defends against the idea that his classroom peers do give wrong answers:

Researcher: So there are no wrong answers?

Carrie: Well some of them. Well, wrong answers, really stupid ones.

Tracy: Ones that are really silly are wrong.

Doug: But we don't say stupid ones. Sometimes they sound silly but sometimes you give an answer that sounds silly but that's because you don't know how to say it, not because you're just being silly.

(Tina's Class, Pre-lesson Interview)

Like Haza's comment previously that she doesn't "know how to say it", Doug also reports a difficulty with expressing his ideas and understanding about puberty. He does not believe the students within his class give "stupid" answers, but acknowledges that their answers may appear "silly" at least on first reading. He goes on to offer an alternative reading, however, that presents students as not "just being silly" but rather processing and engaging in material they are unsure and unfamiliar with.

While silliness may be constructed as off-task and handled as Lucy described "usually I will ignore it and carry on", the students' previous comments indicate these contributions may be useful starting points to engage in dialogue. When we consider dialogue as a way to figure things out (Nystrand et al., 2003), the answers the students construct as silly due to their own uncertainty offer both the teacher and the students an opportunity to work together in creating a new, more detailed understanding (Sandretto, 2016). Using the IRE method of dialogue, the 'silly answers' may be acknowledged but dismissed as wrong and irrelevant. From a critical literacy perspective, I argue that these moments could involve deeper learning and the development of new understandings. In this way the teacher and his or her students leave the narrow question and answer tool of the banking method of education to create a mutually

engaged, problem-solving investigation (Edwards-Groves et al., 2013; Freire, 1996; Hodgen & Webb, 2008; Sandretto, 2016).

### **Learning beyond the 'right answer'.**

When education moves away from the banking method to create a mutual problem solving, the successful learning outcome might not be so rigidly defined. The following example, based on classroom observation notes, and the interviews with students and their teacher illustrates how a lesson that appeared to fail its prescribed assessment where the students did not get the 'right answer', was repositioned within the critical literacy model as being a productive and valuable learning experience.

During the classroom activity that involved the class being separated into five groups, one group of five girls was given a UbyKotex advertisement to work with. This advertisement taken from Celestial Blog (Celestial Blog, 2012) showed a United States space shuttle in orbit around the Earth. Written as a speech bubble "I am confident, due to both my tampon and my degree in advanced mathematics, that my re-entry trajectory calculations are flawless. Initiating sequence".

The group appeared to be having difficulty understanding the advertisement. Attempting the first of the questions provided by the teacher, "What do you think of the advertisement?", they responded with comments of "don't get it" and "what's it meant to be". As the group floundered with producing an answer they could report back to the class, the teacher joined them. She attempted to assist them with an interpretation of the advertisement, however, many of the students were unable to recognise what the space shuttle was. During the post-lesson interview, Kathy talked about not



understanding the advertisement, even after the conversation with her teacher, she still seemed confused about the messages in her groups advert.

Kathy: Except [teacher] explained it ours but I still, it was in space, about to crash maybe, except like there's a space shuttle, I don't get what it had to do with anything.

Like Kathy, the other girls in the group still appeared confused by the message and imagery of the advertisement. The teacher, realising the students were struggling, turned the questions from what they thought the advertisement was saying, to ask them about what made the message unclear. This discussion appeared to engage the students more actively<sup>2</sup> and according to their teacher, as shown below, together they appeared to build a more detailed understanding of how the advertisement failed to connect with them at this moment in their experience.

During the post-lesson interview with the teacher, we discussed this exchange:

Lucy: I was quite surprised that they didn't get the [shuttle] one as much... And even though the shuttle one didn't appear to work I thought it was actually really good because it made them think it was a bigger subject than what they were looking at. I was able to say to them, well maybe this ad isn't targeted at you. They said "why not, because I'm going to use them?" I said, "yes but you don't understand it, so it's set for a higher group, older kids". So we talked about that just because they're going to get their periods not everything will relate to them, not all the experiences will be the same.

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<sup>2</sup> At this point my attention became focused on a different group (the one examined in Chapter 5; Finding – Power) and I was unable to take notes of specific comments and responses.

Researcher: I spoke with a couple [of the students] that were on this table about the shuttle and they said to me “we really didn’t get it.’ But then they said that talking to you made them understand it a lot better.

Lucy: Yeah. They still didn’t really understand the ad. I spoke to one afterwards. I said “did you learn anything from that lesson?” She said “no”. But then we talked about the things we discussed. And she was making really thoughtful responses. “So then did you learn anything from that” And she went “oh yeah, sort of” But I think her whole of idea of learning was being able to put the right idea on the [answer] sheet.

(Lucy, Teacher Interview)

The classroom example reported above shows the potential value of creating and using a critical literacy dialogue within a lesson. While the advertisement holds the potential for multiple readings, the students involved appeared to struggle to express any personal connection or reaction to it. While it could be read that comments I observed during the lesson activity, such as “I don’t get it” were the students’ personal response to the advertisement, this was not the response the students wished to record as their ‘answer’. I argue that used to a banking method of education, students feel an expectation to locate and report the ‘correct’ answer and therefore their inability to find that answer was seen as a failure of the task. As Lucy later proposed, the students’ “whole idea of learning was being able to put the right idea on the [answer] sheet” (Lucy, Teacher interview). It could be argued the choice of having students use answer sheets to record their thoughts undermined the critical literacy notion of there being no ‘correct’ answer. While Lucy was encouraging the students to engage in dialogue, the elements of a banking method approach may have reinforced traditional pedagogical practices. In this dominant construction of classroom learning, being able to give the right answer brings praise and allows people to take up the positioning of “good student”. However,

as Freire (1996) argues, that this dominant construction of learning does not call for students “to know but to memorize” (p. 61), the position of ‘good student’ is not always conducive to developing critical thinking and learning.

Critical literacy endeavours to move beyond the traditional banking method of education and promote learning based on problem-solving and investigation (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011). This chapter argues that engaging students in dialogue provides a powerful tool to this approach to learning. In the lesson reported above, Lucy, (teacher), described how even though the advertisement “didn’t appear to work the way I thought” with the one group of students, she was able to build a discussion that “was actually still really good” (Lucy, Teacher Interview). From Lucy’s comments it appeared that instead of trying to get them to produce the ‘right’ answer, she engaged with the students’ reported disconnect and lack of understanding of the advertisement; “not everything [about menstruation] will relate to them” (Lucy, Teacher Interview). In this way Lucy saw the students’ remarks as a starting point for the discussion. Lucy was able to set aside the “way I thought” the lesson activity would go; in doing so she saw the resulting dialogue “made them think. It was a bigger subject than they were looking at” (Lucy, Teacher Interview). To set aside the traditional pedagogy of finding the ‘right answer’ and her own lesson plan required Lucy to have the courage to explore unknown ideas and opinions with her students. Even while not getting the answers she expected, Lucy used students’ responses as the starting place for her next move in the dialogue. While the idea, what Nystrand et al. (2003) calls uptake, connects to the larger classroom discussion of taking a student’s response and building the discussion upon it, Lucy was able to take up the student’s responses of confusion and build the teaching and learning from there. When she asked the group the question “what do you think of the advertisement”, instead of guiding a search for the answer she expected, Lucy built

a critical literacy dialogue around the students' answers. By placing value in the students' confusion and lack of understanding, questions could be investigated about who the advertisement was directed at, and a potential of different groups, "a higher group, older kids" making different readings. By taking up the students' initial response of confusion, Lucy and the students were able to build new unexpected understandings of the text, which Lucy reported resulted in "really thoughtful responses" from the students.

### **Student as teacher**

While Lucy took an active role in directing the students' engagement with new ideas, the following example illustrates how the teacher being able to relinquish the directive role of teacher may also encourage pursuing new understandings:

After an initial whole class discussion, Tina set up a round-robin activity in which small groups of about five students moved around a series of questions about a specific menstrual product advertisement. For this activity the UbyKotex advertisement, taken from the New York Times website (Newman, 2010), chosen showed a classic car taking off down a desert road. The accompanying large-print script said "I tied a tampon to my keyring so my brother wouldn't take my car. It worked." Underneath the image in significantly smaller script, "Why are 40% of people uncomfortable with tampons?". The teacher, Tina, was circulated and talked with a group of students at the activity sheet that asked, "What do you think the author was trying to say?" Standing separate from the group I made a record of the following discussion:

"Not to be embarrassed." Tracy responded first to the question.

"Why do you think it says not to be embarrassed, Tracy?" the teacher asked.

“Because the brother is really silly not to take the car just because of a tampon, it’s a silly reason. They’re just tampons no one should be embarrassed by tampons.” Tracy responded.

“Yeah I think it’s kind of silly too.” the teacher nodded.

“Why’s there no tampon?” Hamish asked quietly.

“Hamish?” The teacher appeared not to have fully heard his comment.

“If the ad is saying not to be embarrassed, why didn’t they put a tampon on it? They don’t show the keyring with the tampon.”

“Oh I hadn’t thought of that Hamish, that’s a good question. Why do you think they don’t show the keyring?”

“Don’t know. Maybe because a lot of people still do get embarrassed seeing it.” Hamish responded after a pause.

“It does say lots of people get embarrassed.” said Tracy.

“You’re right Tracy. It says that down there. So you think, maybe it doesn’t want to show it because people find it uncomfortable?”

“But I, then it’s kinda saying, tampons are embarrassing even when it’s saying it’s stupid.” Hamish responded.

“Hamish that’s something really interesting to think about.” The teacher commented before moving to the next group.

When Tina, the teacher, joined the group she made moves to position herself, not as the teacher but as a participant in the dialogue. This process disrupts the dominant discursive construction of classroom teaching with the teacher positioning him or herself as separate, directing but not jointly participating in the learning. Traditionally, the teacher, seen as the holder of knowledge, transmits and then assesses the transfer of information from her to the students (Freire, 1996; Sandretto with Klenner, 2011).

However, when Tina responds to the students interpretation with “Yeah I think it’s kind of silly too” the focus could be seen as moving from an assessment of the answer to joining the learning experience. While her agreement with Tracy that the idea that people are embarrassed by tampons is silly gives validation and value to Tracy, Tina also shares her opinion. This allows her to not just join the conversation as an observer, but contribute to it in the same manner as the other participants. In this way, Tina creates a learning experience that “is not carried on by “A” *for* “B” or by “A” *about* “B”, but rather by “A” *with* “B”, mediated by the world – a world which impresses and challenges both parties, giving rise to views and opinions about it” (Freire, 1996, p. 74). In this moment, Tracy and Tina are mutually constructing meaning from the text, they are making a critical interpretation of the advertisement as equal members of the dialogue, rather than student and teacher.

In shifting herself away from the dominant position of teacher, Tina relinquishes some of the power of being constructed as the knowledge holder (Sandretto, 2016). With Tracy, they mutually constructed the idea of being embarrassed of tampons as “silly”, however, with Hamish Tina moved to a position of learner. When Hamish first proposed his question “Why’s there no tampon?”, it was done in a quiet unobtrusive manner that could have been missed by the teacher or considered as not related to the activity question “What do you think the author was trying to say”. However, by taking up Hamish’s question and encouraging him to elaborate on it, the dialogue shifts again to focus on Hamish’s question about the lack of tampon. The question “Why’s there no tampon?” can be viewed as a “significant initiation point” (Sandretto, 2016, p. 104) for discussion. At this point, when Tina, in seeking information for expanding on, or clarifying, queried Hamish on his initial comment, she was also stepping back to allow him room to construction his own question (Edwards-Groves et al., 2013; Sandretto, 2016). By

stepping back, or what Edwards-Groves et al. (2013) call “vacating the floor” (p. 13), Tina provided time and opportunity for Hamish to develop his response and critically consider the first reading of the advertisement.

When Hamish questions “If the ad is saying not to be embarrassed, why didn’t they put a tampon on it?”, he can be seen as taking the lead in a dialogue that investigates how advertisements use the discourses of shame and secrecy. While the first, and most common reading during the classroom activity interpreted the advertisement as encouraging people not to be embarrassed by menstruation, Hamish provided an alternative reading that highlighted the ways advertising maintains and (re)produces dominant discourses around the need for secrecy, where a tampon should never be seen. And taking the lead at that moment, asking the question of the author’s choices, he also encouraged others in the group to consider alternative readings of the text. At this point in the group’s conversation, Tina had already positioned herself, with her response to Tracy, as a participant within the group discussion. Therefore, I posit that Hamish’s question could be read him as initiating a discussion about his reading of the advertisement, rather than seeking out an answer from his teacher. The question could be seen as a way for the group to consider a new idea or way of interpreting the text. When Tina responded “Oh, I hadn’t thought of that Hamish, that’s a good question” she not only placed value on his contribution, but also indicated she was learning from him. In this transitory moment, Hamish is taking up the position of teacher, encouraging investigation and critical learning in others.

## Conclusion

Dialogue, an integral component to critical literacy pedagogy, encourages students and teachers to investigate new understandings and knowledges. The asking of authentic questions enables students to examine ideas and feel their contributions have value. Students reported enjoying being able to participate in discussions, however, some felt pressured under the new approach of critical literacy dialogue. Likewise, teachers may need some supporting scaffolding as they move away from traditional *Initiate-Respond-Evaluate* dialogue. Critical literacy dialogue and its use of authentic questions, gave students an opportunity to engage with the topic of menstruation. Puberty and sexuality education, including the topic of menstruation, is often considered a sensitive topic and an area students lack the maturity and willingness to participate in fully. However, the students in this research indicated a strong desire to learn and redefined the behaviour labelled as immature as their attempts to navigate a new and somewhat awkward topic. Implementing critical literacy dialogue that supports investigations of multiple readings and disrupts traditional student/teacher positioning opens up the possibility for deeper learning and the potential to take up new understandings of menstruation.



## Chapter Eight: Conclusion

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### Introduction

In the previous three chapters, I discussed the findings of this research. Chapter Five's, *Using Power to Position the Experience of Menstruation*, showed the ways dominant discourses of menstruation dismiss girls' experiences as unimportant. However, during the critical literacy lesson I found girls were often able to position themselves as experts as they constructed their first-hand experience as "special knowledge". During the critical literacy workshops and classroom lessons, participants were able to engage in multiple acts of resistance against the dominant discourses creating opportunities for new understandings. In Chapter Six, *(Re)producing, Taking Up and Resisting Discourses of Shame and Secrecy*, I focused on the ways the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy construct our understanding of menstruation. In examining the critical literacy workshops, I first looked at how teachers engaged with this discourse, the ways they took it up as well as how they challenge the construction of menstruation. Following this workshop, the teachers constructed critical literacy lessons in which I observed the ways engaging with advertising texts provided opportunities to examine and challenged discourses of shame and secrecy. From the lesson and the interviews with the student participants, I suggested there appeared to be a move, at least among these participants, away from the dominance of the discourses of shame and secrecy. Finally, in Chapter Seven, *Dialogue in Critical Literacy - Engaging in Collaborative Menstruation Learning*, I examined how the use of critical literacy dialogue opened space for students and teachers to explore multiple constructions of menstruation. The use of dialogue not only encouraged students to participate in learning, but also provided

opportunities for them to express their interest and enjoyment thus disrupting the discourse that menstruation was a difficult topic for students.

Working from a feminist poststructuralist framework, I believe research requires action. Without action, theory alone becomes stagnant and ineffectual (Flax, 1987). Engaging with critical literacy aligns well with this need for more than theory. Critical literacy also requires action (Harwood, 2008; McDaniel, 2004). Both feminist poststructuralism and critical literacy seek to disrupt privilege, power and marginalisation rather than just report on their existence (McLaren & Lankshear, 1993; Powell et al., 2001). However, it should be noted that action does not always require grand changes or radical activist moments. Just as with resistance and agency, action also occurs in small manoeuvres and spaces. Action produced by this thesis may be as simple as someone reconsidering their own constructions of menstruation, or on a larger scale contributing to the development of a puberty and sexuality education policy. The completed research produced a number of implications for how we construct our understandings of menstruation, and our teaching and learning of menstruation within a puberty and sexuality education programme.

This chapter starts by outlining the research question that formed the basis of this study. I outline the structure of my research and briefly summarise the findings. With these findings in mind, I situate this research within the current literature. From there I propose a number of implications this new knowledge may have. I start by questioning the assumption that shame and secrecy remains a dominant discourse in young people's construction of menstruation, and whether, in trying to address these discourse teachers in turn (re)create it. Then I look at the effect a lack of professional development in puberty and sexuality education may have on those teaching menstruation and their willingness to engage with the topic. Finally, I look at the potential benefits of using critical literacy dialogue within the lesson, and how this may require a new approach to

how we assess learning. Following the discussion on implications, I address the limitations of this research, noting the low participant numbers, and the confines of time during the thesis process. I finish the chapter by reporting the potential for further research this study opens up.

### **Research Question**

This research posed the question “*What happens if we use a critical literacy pedagogy in puberty menstruation education*”? In looking at this question I examined it from the perspective of each group of participants; the teachers and the students. Focusing on the affect critical literacy had on teaching menstruation, the teachers and I, in their interviews, discussed their reactions to using the new approach. Did they find it a useful approach to teaching menstruation that promoted an engaging, interesting and informative lessons? With the students, the aim was to see how the lesson may have developed their understandings of menstruation, and also ask for their opinions on the lesson to see what effect using a critical literacy approach had.

### **Findings**

My research study was undertaken from a feminist poststructuralist framework and called upon critical theory in developing a critical literacy approach. The qualitative study involved workshops with teachers and the observation of the teachers’ classroom lessons on using critical literacy. All the participants; teachers, a small group of students from each lesson were interviewed. Transcripts of the workshops, survey and interviews, along with field notes and lesson activity sheets contributed to the data used in this research.

In answer to the research question, I found that the critical literacy approach encouraged the participants to explore the ways they take up and resist the dominant discourses of shame and secrecy that construct our understanding of menstruation. For teachers, the use of critical literacy promoted the questioning of dominant discourses that were constructed as ‘common knowledge’. Similarly, I propose it allowed students the space to openly reject discourses of shame and secrecy and negotiate new ways of understanding. The critical literacy approach also offered girls a chance to position themselves as “holders of special knowledge” (Fingerson, 2006), enabling them to constitute themselves in powerful ways. Finally, I found using critical literacy to teach menstruation promoted the use of critical literacy dialogue within the lessons. Critical literacy dialogue offered a different approach that allowed for a collaborative building of knowledge and opened possibilities for a variety of meanings and new avenues of exploration.

Overall, this research found the critical literacy approach to the teaching and learning of menstruation provided opportunities to question and challenge dominant discursive constructions about menstruation being shameful and secret, as well as the dominant discourse that this construction results in students’ unwillingness to participate in puberty lessons. Students reported that learning about menstruation, and puberty, could be fun and interesting and teachers indicated they found the critical literacy approach useful and something they would continue with.

### **Implications**

During the pre-lesson interviews with the student participants I asked if they considered menstruation embarrassing. The most common response from the students was to say ‘no’. A girl from one group and a boy from another group said yes, and another boy

appeared to not understand what menstruation was<sup>3</sup>. All other responses indicated there was no embarrassment. Cher, one of the girls in a group responded “no, it’s just normal”. These responses that menstruation is not embarrassing seemed to contradict the assertion in a lot of research that shame and secrecy is a dominant discourse in the construction of menstruation (Diorio & Munro, 2000; Erchull, 2013; Newton, 2012). As my research was built on literature that asserted the dominance of the shame and secrecy discourse, I pursued this questioning about what might be difficult about learning about menstruation. While students Haza and Bobbie-Jo found the topic “interesting” and Clarence and Quinten talk about their enjoyment of experiments with tampons and pads, as discussed earlier in *Chapter Six: (Re)producing, Taking Up and Resisting Discourses of Shame and Secrecy* some of the female students did express discomfort learning alongside the boys:

Kathy:               The teaching is really easy, good, I like all the diagrams and stuff. But it’s just the boys.

Researcher:       The boys?

Kathy:               With the parts, the stuff, and how they go. They go “oh yuck”.

For Kathy, it was not learning about menstruation that was embarrassing. She liked “all the diagrams and stuff” but did not like having to deal with the boys’ reactions.

Therefore, it may be of potential benefit to examine how influential the teaching of menstruation is in young people taking up discourses of shame and secrecy. Children do not enter puberty and sexuality education void of the dominant discourses associated with their bodies, gender and sexuality. However, even with students having dominant discursive constructions of menstruation from other sources, they still appear to resist

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<sup>3</sup> I explained menstruation was “a woman bleeds out the lining that she created to support a baby if she got pregnant”. He continued asking questions. I ended this by suggesting he talk with his teacher. However, during the rest of the interview he contributed to the same degree as his peers.

discourses of shame and secrecy. During the lesson activities, most students rejected this discourse. The critical literacy lesson's focus on shame and secrecy may be related to the advertisement texts used. Menstrual product advertisements draw heavily on this discourse, reproducing it while presenting their products as the only viable solution (Del Saz-Rubio & Pennock-Speck, 2009; Mazzarella, 2008). Because this message appears prominent in advertising, it often becomes the idea that critical literacy examines. I argue here, in assuming that discourses of shame and secrecy are dominant in young people's constructions of menstruation, and in focusing on these discourses, teachers reproduce and reinforce it.

While not arguing that we should simply ignore the discourses of shame and secrecy that construct our understandings of menstruation, I believe more needs to be done to disrupt the dominance of these discourses. As shown in *Chapter Six: (Re)producing, Taking Up and Resisting Discourses of Shame and Secrecy*, during the teachers' workshops, the idea that menstruation could be understood as any other than problematic was dismissed as unrealistic. This construction of menstruation persisted even when alternative discourses were presented. For the teachers at the workshops, the idea of menstruation as exciting would be a "hard sell" (Pennsy, Teachers Workshop 3) and there would be "no point telling girls it isn't embarrassing" (Patsy, Teachers Workshop 2). However, Lucy's example of Japanese culture where families have a meal of red rice to celebrate a girl's menarche show a potential to explore possible celebrations. Also when Haza talks about the fun and laughter of learning about menstruation online, it indicates the possibility that discourses of fun and excitement are possible. Alternative discursive constructions of menstruation exist, but they are often relegated to being viewed as unrealistic or unattainable. Teachers, like the rest of society, are constituted within these discourses therefore making it difficult for them to imagine or take up alternative discourse as viable. Therefore, it may be difficult for them

to perceive of creating lessons on menstruation that are not focused on addressing shame and secrecy.

Due to this difficulty of conceptualising menstruation outside of dominant discursive constructions, I also suggest a need for professional development in the area of puberty and sexuality education. While comprehensive puberty and sexuality education is part of the New Zealand curriculum, there appears little pre-service or in-school professional development. While not the focus of this research, much of the literature reviewed pointed to a need to provide training and support for teaching sexuality education (eg. Buston et al., 2001; Goldman & Coleman, 2013; Ollis, 2010). This desired need for development in teaching sexuality education was echoed during this research. . While the teacher participants reported that their years of experience had made them comfortable with the topic, one teacher reported surprise at the lack of teachers wishing to participate. She stated that many of the teachers she knows do not feel comfortable with their ability to teach puberty and sexuality. And “finding time for [professional development] is hard, and the focus is always on other things” (Tina, teacher interviews).

One of the main concerns, for both teachers and students, when teaching puberty and sexuality education is the teacher’s confidence or lack thereof in dealing with the topic (Buston et al., 2001; Duffy et al., 2013; Goldman & Coleman, 2013). The idea of being comfortable is a factor stressed by teachers. However, discomfort still appears common (Buston et al., 2001). In discussing her experience with other teachers, Tina reported “they often talk about being nervous about how to teach, what they should say” (Tina, teacher interview). As Buston (2001) points out, with very few opportunities to professional development in ways to feel confident and comfortable with this curriculum topic, teachers are offered little chance in building on their skills.

In creating pre-service training and teachers' professional development that builds both confidence and knowledge, we may be able to challenge the construction of puberty and sexuality as a 'difficult topic'. As discussed above, the students I interviewed about learning about menstruation appear to find the topic interesting and important. With the knowledge and confidence of the teacher being seen as important factors for students when learning about puberty and sexuality, increased teacher training and development may affect this construction of puberty and sexuality education as uncomfortable and difficult (Allen, 2009; Buston et al., 2001). However, with the unwillingness to participate, or simply the unavailability of pre-service training or teacher professional development, it remains unlikely that puberty and sexuality education will shift in its construction as difficult. And indeed, as Duffy et al (2013) posits these ongoing issues may result in an increasing negative impact on effective puberty and sexuality teaching.

In suggesting a need for greater pre-service training and professional development, I also propose developing new ways to teach and learn about menstruation and indeed, puberty and sexuality education. In creating critical literacy approaches, teachers offer opportunities for students to participate, to discuss their own opinions, and to challenge some of the dominant constructs. In chapter seven's *Dialogue in Critical Literacy - Engaging in Collaborative Menstruation Learning*, students reported an interest and desire to be able to engage in dialogue about their views of menstruation. Donny, expressed a desire to be more interactive, and for him that included "as well as being able to talk more" (Lucy's Class, pre-lesson group interview). The idea of being able to talk more was also evident when I asked another group what their teacher did well. For Doug this was "she said she wasn't just wanting to teach us what she thought. She wanted us to tell her what we thought" (Tina's Class, post-lesson interview). While some students expressed interest in being able to discuss their ideas, for others this seemed



difficult. In Lucy's class, as reported in chapter seven, a group of students were so focused on finding the "right" answer they appeared reluctant to supply any answer, and another group reported feeling uncomfortable having to report their opinions back to the class. Therefore, in implementing new approaches students may require practice in developing these skills.

In using a critical literacy approach, students and teachers are called upon to engage with a variety of new skills. Ideas around engaging and with dialogue, the concept of not seeing the 'right answer' and working with new questions that investigate constructed meaning may all be foreign and require some skill-building activities.. This may be true for both teachers and students as they build their experience. Likewise, in creating a critical literacy approach we are asking students and teachers to step away from the dominant classroom pedagogy. A reliance on the banking method approach creates classroom pedagogy of teacher-led lessons. In these lessons, teachers supply the answer, either directly or by directing the students to the information and the students then remember and repeat this information back as an answers (Freire, 1996). The classroom learning environment during puberty and sexuality education often becomes highly regulated by imposed class room management. There are assumptions that the students will act out, behave inappropriately and this must be watched for and curtailed. Teachers discussed the need to stop the laughter from their students, reminding them "that it's not something to be laughed at" (Tina, teacher interview), and to ensure they all maintain a classroom atmosphere.

The dominance of these beliefs about the nature of classroom learning and a need to manage students' immature behaviour may need to be challenged in the development of critical literacy lessons. In creating a critical literacy learning environment, there will be a need for teachers and students to take risks in engaging in new ideas and new classroom pedagogies.

Critical literacy requires teachers and students to engage in a mutual learning process. In doing so, it will disrupt traditional learning arrangements. Therefore, it requires not just learning new skills but developing a different way of considering education. When discussing menstruation, and puberty and sexuality education, we are asking students and teachers to explore areas of personal opinion that may feel vulnerable. There will be a need to build supportive environments that allow for diversity of meaning. But before expecting this from teachers, they may need to explore their own positioning within sexuality and diversity (Ollis, 2010). In requiring teachers to engage with the students as mutual learners, teachers navigate conversations that move beyond the initial planned route. Lucy's experience with a group of students who did not understand one of the advertisement texts, showed that looking beyond the right answer can create a thoughtful deeper learning experience. This type of classroom dialogue requires some level of courage and confidence in engaging in potentially unplanned territory. It also requires an awareness of education and learning occurring beyond the prescribed outcomes. In the example above, Lucy recognised that the dialogue created with her students enabled them to think about the topic in "bigger" ways, beyond the original scope. And by the end, Lucy reported one of the students she talked with "making really thoughtful responses" (Lucy, teacher interview). So while arguing that students and teachers may require scaffolding and training in approaching critical literacy, we may need to examine how we identify successful learning, and how that is assessed beyond seeking the replication of the correct answer.

During this research process, information on teaching menstruation and to a broader extent, puberty was scarce. While there appears a larger proportion of research into sexuality education, puberty still remains under researched. Recent New Zealand events surrounding comments made by secondary school level boys that encouraged

rape and claimed this was a normal part of the school's student ethos has pushed the need for comprehensive puberty and sexuality education in New Zealand schools (Donovan, 2017; Radio New Zealand, 2017). I propose that along with research into the effectiveness of puberty and sexuality education, we also need to explore how best to provide this education. What makes for successful puberty and sexuality education? How do we educate and support teachers in providing this education? While I unequivocally support the need for greater research into puberty and sexuality education, I equally argue that we need to investigate ways of teacher education that will enable teachers to feel comfortable and confident in providing this needed education.

### **Limitations**

In reporting these findings, it is also important to note the limitations of this study. Primarily, the main limitation is the number of participants. This research faced reluctance from participants to engage with a study that involved puberty and sexuality education. . As one participant put it “critical literacy seems really interesting, but why talk about menstruation”. With menstruation constructed as silent and secret, and puberty and sexuality education seen as a ‘sensitive’ topic, teachers may not be willing to give their time and what opportunities they may have for professional development to research into the teaching of menstruation.

While I do not believe the size of the study calls into question the findings I reported, it can make it difficult to generalise across all schools (O'Reilly & Parker, 2012). Also the smaller sample size does not show the variations of socio-economic and ethnic differences that may occur in a bigger study. The lack of participant involvement may be seen as a deterrent, but there is a need for a larger scale research into teaching and learning puberty and sexuality education.

## **Future Research**

I believe this research shows the potential value of using critical literacy to teach menstruation. Further research into teaching menstruation, but also expanded throughout the puberty and sexuality education curriculum, could supply more in-depth information, both in terms of ethnic and socio-economic diversity and a wider range of 'sensitive' topics.

Secondly, I believe there is a need to investigate the reasons teachers feel underprepared for this curriculum topic. Are teachers entering the profession undereducated in the area of teaching puberty and sexuality education? Are dominant discourses of secrecy, and the dread of a 'sensitive' topic being (re)produced within the teacher education programme? Research into pre-service and in-service professional development may therefore be useful in discovering both the issues causing teachers to be concerned, as well as approaches that allow them to feel confident in their teaching.

## **Conclusion**

Critical literacy is an approach that can be seen as beneficial across the curriculum. During this research, I showed how a critical literacy approach enabled young people to challenge and resist dominant discourses of shame and secrecy. During the observed lessons involved in this study, some of the girls were able to use their own experiences and information about menstruation to position themselves as powerful and important. The positioning was also allowed the girls to challenge the binaries of male/female that position female experiences as less. Promotion of critical literacy dialogue within the

lessons provided opportunities for both teachers and students to approach learning in new ways and collaboratively build new knowledge. I therefore propose that critical literacy has the potential to shift dominant discourses and allow alternative discourses to construct the ways we understand menstruation.

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While more research needs to be done, I am also proposing that a critical literacy approach enhances the teaching of menstruation and contributes to teachers' confidence in the topic. The critical literacy workshops provided teachers opportunities to understand how dominant discourses construct their own understandings of menstruation. Previous to the workshop, these constructions may have remained unquestioned and simply accepted as "common-sense truth". By developing the new skills of a critical literacy approach, teachers also examined how they took up some discourses while rejecting others, and began to question the dominant discursive construction of menstruation as shameful and secret. The exploration that started in workshops was able to be continued in the classroom, where teachers worked with students to build a learning environment that promoted mutual investigation of new and varied understandings of menstruation

This year, New Zealand has seen calls to create more effective and compulsory sexuality education (Graham, 2017; New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2017), I strongly believe this needs to start with how we teach puberty. How we teach puberty, specifically menstruation, has a major impact on how young people start to construct a sense of their own bodies and maturing sexuality. If we teach menstruation as being bothersome and problematic then we are contributing to the construction of women's bodies as problematic and needing intervention or restriction. These discursive

constructions are likely to contribute to young women's issues with confidence as they see themselves as needing to hide or control their developing bodies. I am therefore arguing that to provide an effective puberty and sexuality education programme we need to consider what we teach young people about menstruation and how we can contribute to the construction of women's bodies as valued and powerful. Using a critical literacy approach as part of puberty and sexuality education provides young people an opportunity to explore, and potentially challenge, constructions of embarrassment and shame, and opening up new discursive constructions.

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## Appendix A: Participant Information and Consent forms

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### **Reconsidering Menstruation: Teaching menstruation with critical literacy. INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPATING TEACHERS**

Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate I thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and I thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

This research is being undertaken for my Doctoral degree in Education at the University of Otago. The aim of the research is to investigate ways people can access and utilise different constructions of menstruation, the way they think and talk about menstruation, and how it becomes incorporated into how we construct and recreate the idea of womanhood. The use of a critical literacy approach for teaching about menstruation will be examined. This approach is a way to promote and encourage questions about and possibly challenges to some of the dominant constructions of menstruation, and to present possibly take up alternative ways of considering what menstruation means.

#### **What Type of Participants are being sought?**

The participants I seek are those teachers who teach classroom lessons on menstruation to year seven students.

#### **What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in approximately a two-hour workshop on critical literacy. This workshop will be recorded and transcribed. You will also be asked to teach your lessons about menstruation using the critical literacy approaches we will workshop together. These lessons will be digitally video recorded, and observed by the researcher. These recordings will later be transcribed, and used along with the researcher's field notes to inform the study. You will also take part in three interviews. These interviews will take approximately 20 minutes each and occur in a private space of your choosing within the school environment. The timing of the interview will be negotiated to suit you. They may take place during class release time or out of class time (e.g. lunchtime). The interviews will be digitally audiotaped and later transcribed.

Please be aware that you may decide, without any disadvantage, not to take part in the project.

#### **What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

I will ask your name. However, for the purposes of this project I will ask you to choose a pseudonym. Your real name will not appear in my thesis or any subsequent publications. The lesson will be videotaped and our interviews will be audiotaped, and both will be transcribed. The information you give me during the interview will be used as part of my Doctoral thesis. The results of the project



may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes your experiences teaching menstruation, and your opinions and experiences of utilising critical literacy as a teaching tool. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. If at any time you feel hesitant or uncomfortable answering a question or discussing something, you are reminded that you have a right to decline to answer, or withdraw from the project.

The information I gather from these interviews will only be available to my supervisors and me. The interview recordings will be stored securely, with only myself and my supervisors having access to them. Data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for at least 5 years in secure storage. At the completion of the project, the recordings of your interview will be destroyed even though the data derived from the research will, in most cases, be kept for much longer or possibly indefinitely. The information gathered from the interview will be used within my thesis. You are welcome to request a summary of this thesis should you wish.

### **Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and with no disadvantage to yourself of any kind.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Researcher:

Carole (Shire) Agnew

College of Education

University Telephone Number: 479 5975

Email Address: shire.agnew@otago.ac.nz

Research Supervisors:

Dr. Alex Gunn and/or

College of Education

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Dr. Susan Sandretto

College of Education

University Telephone Number: 479 8820

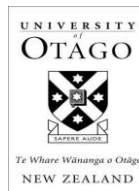
Email Address

susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

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## **Reconsidering menstruation: Teaching menstruation with critical literacy CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPATING TEACHERS**



I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

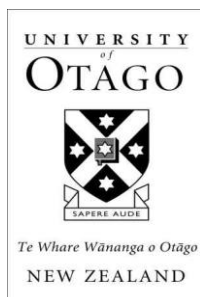
1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information from audio and video recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;
4. As part of my participation in this research I will agree to partake in two two hour workshops in critical literacy as preparation to teaching menstruation;
5. This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes my experiences teaching menstruation and the critical literacy approach. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. In the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
6. As a sign of appreciation for my participation I will receive a book voucher; and
7. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

(Signature of participant)

(Date)

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

13/188  
21/07/2014

## **Reconsidering menstruation: Teaching menstruation with critical literacy INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

Your child's classroom teacher has agreed to participate in my study, so thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet before deciding whether or not to agree to your child's participation. If you decide to let your child participate I thank you. If you decide not to agree for your child to take part there will be no disadvantage to your child and I thank you for considering our request.

### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

This research is being undertaken for my Doctoral degree in Education at the University of Otago. The aim of the research is to explore the effects of your child's teacher using a critical literacy teaching approach when teaching the topic of menstruation. I will explore how it affects what is said and understood about menstruation. The use of a critical literacy approach in which menstrual product advertising is discussed and analysed will be examined as a way to promote and encourage questions about how we understand menstruation, and possibly take up alternative ways of thinking about what menstruation means.

### **What Type of Participants are being sought?**

I am asking all year seven students in your child's class to participate in the classroom lesson. In addition, I will invite a small group of students to take part in a group interview. Your child may choose to participate in these interviews. Participants in the research will receive a movie voucher as a sign of appreciation.

### **What will Participants be Asked to Do?**

Should you agree for your child to take part in this project, she or he will be asked to participate in either two one-to-one interviews, or two group interviews. The type of interview will be his or her choice. The interviews will take approximately an hour each and occur in a space within the school that allows for privacy. The timing of the interview will be negotiated to suit the participants. They may take place during class time or out of class time (e.g., lunchtime). She or he will also be observed during class lessons on menstruation.

### **What Data or Information will be Collected and What Use will be Made of it?**

Your child will be asked his or her name. However, for the purposes of this project I will also ask him or her choose a pseudonym. His or her real name will not appear in my research. The lesson or lessons in which the topic of menstruation is taught will be videotaped, however the focus of the video will be on the teacher. Our interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. The information your child gives me during the interview will be used as part of

my Doctoral thesis. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your child's anonymity.

This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes your child's understanding of what menstruation is, his/her experience of the classroom lesson or lessons about menstruation, and his or her opinions of using critical literacy as a teaching tool. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used. If at any time your child feels hesitant or uncomfortable answering a question or discussing something, he or she will be reminded that he or she has a right to decline to answer, or withdraw from the project.

The information I gather from these interviews will only be available to my supervisors and myself. The interview recordings will be stored securely, with only myself and my supervisors having access to them. Data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for at least 5 years in secure storage. At the completion of the project, the recordings of your child's interview will be destroyed even though the data derived from the research will, in most cases, be kept for much longer or possibly indefinitely. The information gathered from the interview will be used within my thesis and any subsequent publications. You or your child are welcome to request a summary of this thesis should you wish

### **Can Participants Change their Mind and Withdraw from the Project?**

Your child may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to him or her of any kind.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Researcher:

Carole (Shire) Agnew

College of Education

University Telephone Number:- 479 5975

Email Address:- [shire.agnew@otago.ac.nz](mailto:shire.agnew@otago.ac.nz)

Research Supervisors:

Dr. Alex Gunn

and/or

Dr. Susan Sandretto

College of Education

College of Education

University Telephone Number:- 479 4261

University Telephone Number: 479 8820

Email Address

Email Address

[alex.gunn@otago.ac.nz](mailto:alex.gunn@otago.ac.nz)

[susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz](mailto:susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz)

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

13/188  
21/07/2014



## **Reconsidering menstruation: Teaching menstruation with critical literacy**

### **CONSENT FORM FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My child's participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw my child from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information from audio or video recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years;
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes my child's understanding and beliefs about menstruation, and his/her experience of the classroom lesson. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that my child feels hesitant or uncomfortable he/she may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind;
5. My child will receive a movie voucher as a sign of appreciation for his/her participation;
6. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my child's anonymity.

I agree for my child to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of parent/guardian)

.....  
(Date)

.....

(Name of child)

This study has been approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03 479 8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

## **General Information.**

Please read this information booklet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate I thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you of any kind.

### **What is the research about?**

This research is my doctoral degree project. As part of this project I will work with teachers and talk to young people about their understandings of menstruation and their opinions of classroom lesson about menstruation. I want to find ways that encourage young people to think of a wider range of possible ideas about how they view menstruation and what they think it means to menstruate.

### **Who do I seek?**

I will be observing the classroom and videoing the teacher as she or he teaches in your class. Only the teacher will appear on the video recording, however all class conversations will be recorded and I will be observing classroom behaviour, in relation to the class lesson.

I would also like to talk to about five Year Seven students who have taken part in the lessons on menstruation. So I am asking if you would like to be an interview participant as well. Should you decide to take part, you will have a choice of individual or group interviews. These interviews will take about an hour and occur in a private place at your school. You will help set up the timing for this interview to suit you and your teacher. The interviews may take place during class time or out of class time (e.g. lunchtime).

### **Can you change your mind about participating?**

You can decide not to answer any question during the interview, as well as decide you do not wish to take part and withdraw from this project at any time, without any disadvantage to you.

### **What information will be collected?**

I will ask your name and age. However, to ensure your privacy a pseudonym, or fake name, of your choice will be used in this project. Only this pseudonym will appear in the written project. The interview conversation will be about your understanding of menstruation and opinions of the classroom lesson on menstruation. The interview will be recorded, then written out by researcher.



If, at any time, you do not wish to discuss something you have the right to decline to answer.

The information collected will only be available to my supervisors and myself. It will be stored securely, and then at the completion of this project, it will be destroyed. You are welcome to request a summary of my thesis should you wish to read it.

### If you have any Questions about this project:

Feel free to contact myself, or my supervisor

Carole (Shire) Agnew  
College of Education  
University Telephone number: 479 5975  
Email: [shire.agnew@otago.ac.nz](mailto:shire.agnew@otago.ac.nz)  
Or:

Research Supervisors:

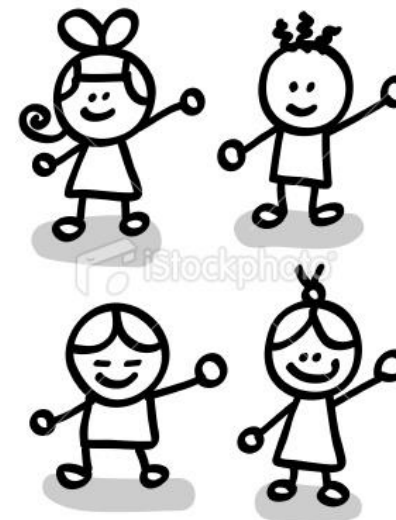
Dr. Alex Gunn and/or  
College of Education  
University Telephone - 479 4261  
Email Address  
[alex.gunn@otago.ac.nz](mailto:alex.gunn@otago.ac.nz)

Dr. Susan Sandretto  
College of Education  
University Telephone - 479 8820  
Email Address  
[susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz](mailto:susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz)



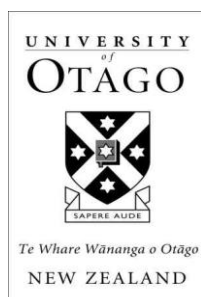
## Information Sheet for Students:

Learning about menstruation - What does advertising teach us?



## Appendix B: School Contact and consent form.

Reference Number 13/188  
25/02/14



Dear School Principal,

Hello, my name is Shire Agnew, and I am a PhD candidate at the College of Education, University of Otago. I would like to consider my request for your school's participation my research.

My research is looking at using a critical literacy approach to teaching menstruation as part of the Year Seven Positive Puberty unit. I am hoping to show that using a critical literacy approach of examining menstrual product advertisements will be a new and interesting method of teaching the topic and provide students with a wider range of ways to understand menstruation.

I hope to work with a small group of teachers (3-4) from schools in this area. If you agree that the study can be conducted at your school, I will approach teachers and thereafter families and students seeking consent for participation. This research will involve workshops that will provide the teachers with professional development in the area of critical literacy and preparation for the classroom lessons on menstruation. I will also be requesting to record and observe these lessons, and perform a series of interviews with the participating teachers, and a small group of students from each class. For further detailed information I have attached the Teachers' Information and Consent forms for your perusal.

There is a consent form attached for you to complete and post using the envelope supplied if you agree for me to approach teachers from your school to invite them to participate in the project.

Thank you for your consideration and if you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or my supervisors.

Carole (Shire) Agnew  
College of Education  
University Telephone Number: 479 6137  
Email Address: shire.agnew@otago.ac.nz

Research Supervisors:  
Dr. Alex Gunn  
College of Education

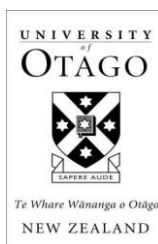
and/or

Dr. Susan Sandretto  
College of Education

University Telephone Number:- 479 4261  
Email Address  
[alex.gunn@otago.ac.nz](mailto:alex.gunn@otago.ac.nz)

University Telephone Number:-479 8820  
Email Address  
[susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz](mailto:susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz)

Reference Number 13/188  
25/02/14



### **Reconsidering Menstruation: Teaching menstruation with critical literacy. SCHOOL CONSENT FORM**

I have read the letter and Information Sheets concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:

1. Participation of the school, staff and students in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Any school or individual identifying information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project, but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for five years, after which it will be destroyed;
4. The student and staff participants will receive a retail voucher as a 'thank you' for taking part in this project.
5. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library, (Dunedin, New Zealand), but every attempt will be made to preserve the anonymity of participants.

On behalf of the school I agree to your presence at school in order to conduct the above research project.

.....  
(Signed)

.....  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(School)



## Appendix D: Critical literacy questions

### Critical literacy questions

<http://www.education.tas.gov.au/curriculum/standards/english/english/teachers/critlit>

### What kinds of critical questions can we ask of texts?

These questions can be asked of most spoken, written, visual, multimedia and performance texts. They encourage students to question beliefs that are often taken for granted.

#### Critical literacy questions

##### ***Textual purpose(s)***

- ☐ What is this text about? How do we know?
- ☐ Who would be most likely to read and/or view this text and why?
- ☐ Why are we reading and/or viewing this text?
- ☐ What does the composer of the text want us to know?

##### ***Textual structures and features***

- ☐ What are the structures and features of the text?
- ☐ What sort of genre does the text belong to?
- ☐ What do the images suggest?
- ☐ What do the words suggest?
- ☐ What kind of language is used in the text?

##### ***Construction of characters***

- ☐ How are children, teenagers or young adults constructed in this text?
- ☐ How are adults constructed in this text?
- ☐ Why has the composer of the text represented the characters in a particular way?

##### ***Gaps and silences***

- ☐ Are there “gaps” and “silences” in the text?
- ☐ Who is missing from the text?
- ☐ What has been left out of the text?
- ☐ What questions about itself does the text not raise?

##### ***Power and interest***

- ☐ In whose interest is the text?
- ☐ Who benefits from the text?
- ☐ Is the text fair?
- ☐ What knowledge does the reader/viewer need to bring to this text in order to understand it?
- ☐ What positions, voices and interests are at play in the text?
- ☐ How is the reader or viewer positioned in relation to the composer of the text?
- ☐ How does the text depict age, gender and/or cultural groups?
- ☐ Whose views are excluded or privileged in the text?

- ☐ Who is allowed to speak? Who is quoted?
- ☐ Why is the text written the way it is?

***Whose view: whose reality?***

- ☐ What view of the world is the text presenting?
- ☐ What kinds of social realities does the text portray?
- ☐ How does the text construct a version of reality?
- ☐ What is real in the text?
- ☐ How would the text be different if it were told in another time, place or culture?

***Interrogating the composer***

- ☐ What kind of person, and with what interests and values, composed the text?
- ☐ What view of the world and values does the composer of the text assume that the reader/viewer holds? How do we know?

***Multiple meanings***

- ☐ What different interpretations of the text are possible?
- ☐ How do contextual factors influence how the text is interpreted?
- ☐ How does the text [encourage you to make] mean[ing]?
- ☐ How else could the text have been written?

## Appendix E: Lesson plan

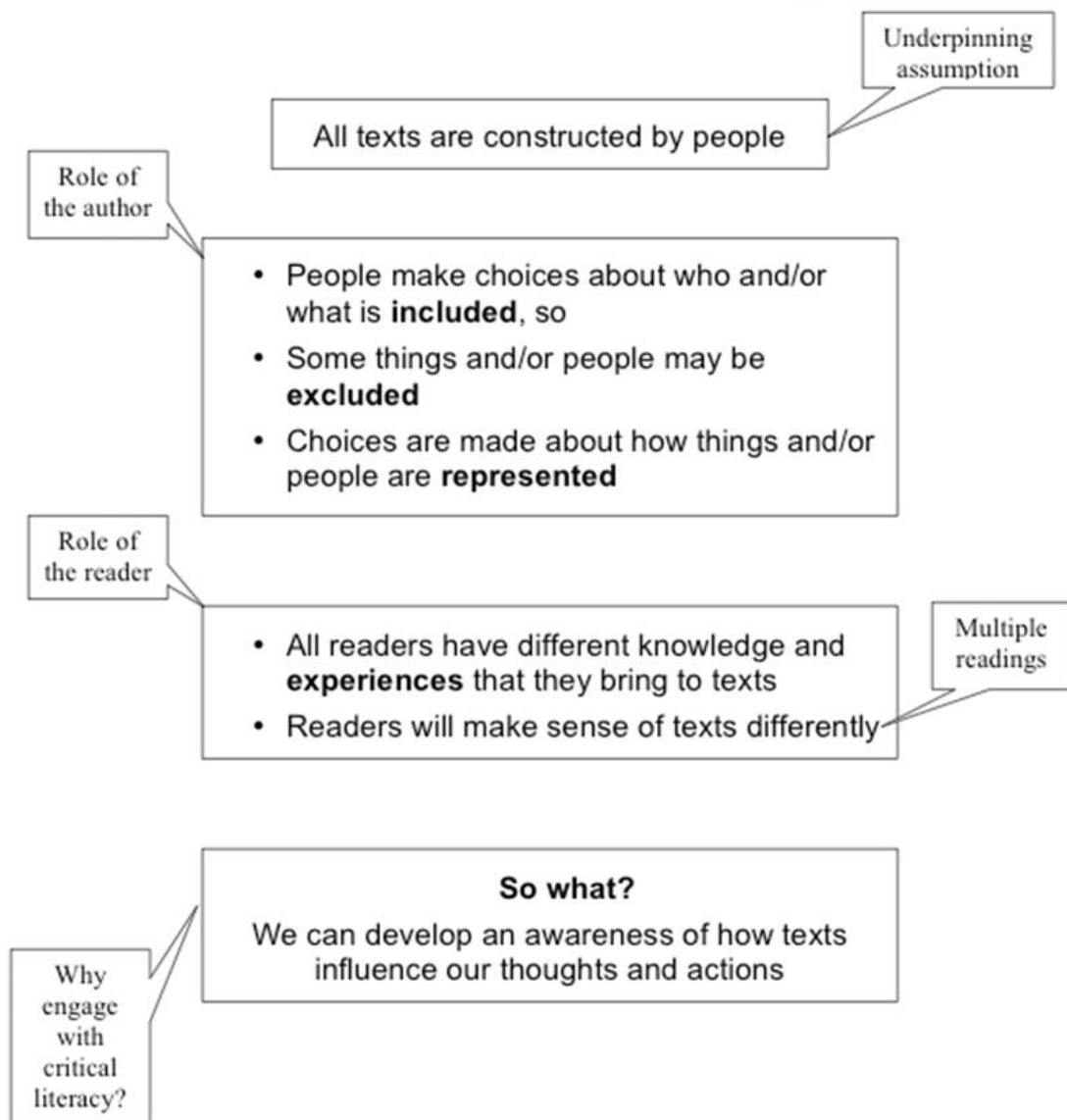
|   |
|---|
| Text (title, level, type, source)                                       |
| Rationale for selection of text   |
| Link to critical literacy poster  |
| Questions to initiate student dialogue                                  |
| Metalinguage  |
| Dialogue skills   |
| Feedback (to individual students or the whole class, verbal or written) |
| Reflection on the lesson.   |

Critical literacy lesson plan template

© Dr Susan Sandretto, 2011



# Critical Literacy



Susan Sandretto & The Critical Literacy Research Team  
[susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz](mailto:susan.sandretto@otago.ac.nz)

## Appendix F: Interview questions

These questions provided a personal plan during the interviews, but where only a guideline depending on how the interviews went.

### Students:

#### Pre-Lesson

- Welcome
- Thanks for participating
- Admin (e.g. pseudonyms, right to withdraw)
  
- Do you like learning about menstruation?

Why? Why not?

- What things make it more fun/more interesting?
- What things make it difficult?
- What would you like to learn?

#### Post-Lesson

- What opinions/thoughts did you have about the lesson?
- What aspects did you enjoy?
- What aspects did you not enjoy?
- What, if anything, could be done better?

### Teachers:

- Welcome
- Thanks for participating
- Admin (e.g. pseudonyms, right to withdraw)

- In what ways did the workshop affect how you construct menstruation for yourself?
- Did the workshops change how you approached teaching menstruation?
- Was there anything missing/more needed from the workshops?
- How did you find using critical literacy in the classroom?
- Did you have any problems with it? Anything unexpected?
- Would you consider teaching this way in the future?